

# **THE SPLENDID CRIME**

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**GEORGE GOODCHILD**



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**THE SPLENDID CRIME**



# The Splendid Crime

BY  
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SIR HENRY LUSH sat in his exceedingly comfortable library in Sloane Square, reading the financial page of *The Times* and looking fairly well pleased with himself. Some of the figures before him reflected his energies in the world of high finance, and he now felt that he had earned a respite. At his elbow lay piles of brochures concerned with travel—alluring pictures of the Canary Isles, South Africa, the Riviera. Others gave steamship sailings.

He leaned back, puffed contentedly at a very fragrant cigar, and conjured up pictures of sunlit seas, palms, orange-groves. It was all very delightful on a bleak December evening, when tens of thousands of people in London were shivering with the cold, and thousands more were near the verge of starvation. Sir Henry's only problem was whether he should take his yacht or go as a passenger on one of the floating palaces pictured on those entertaining itineraries.

The cigar—his eighth since breakfast—burned very low. He flung the stump into the huge log fire, finished his cocktail, and rang the bell. An obsequious manservant entered and bowed. Sir Henry addressed him without turning his head.

“My bath, Simmons!”

“Ready, sir.”

"I am dining at the club. Dinner-jacket—you know."

"Very good, sir."

Ten minutes later he was splashing about in the big porcelain bath which Simmons had prepared to the exact requisite temperature. He then repaired to the adjoining bedroom, dressed leisurely, and reflected upon the details of his anticipated dinner. Another cigar was necessary. He felt for his cigar-case, but remembered he had left it on the dressing-table with his money and watch.

It was there still—a very elaborate affair in gold and platinum. He opened it casually, and made to extract a cigar. There were three left, but only two bore the ornate gilt band. The third one bore a white band, and on the circular disc was inscribed a pair of scales in red ink. Sir Henry's face went pallid as he saw it. The fat hand which held the cigar-case trembled visibly, and he sat down, breathing heavily.

"Simmons!" he yelled.

The valet appeared.

"Have—have you been in this room since—since I undressed?"

"Certainly not, Sir Henry."

"You—you are sure?"

"Quite sure, sir. I prepared the bath, laid out your change of clothing, and then called you."

Sir Henry's round eyes went to the window, which was slightly open.



"Did you—open that?"

"No, sir. I think it was open when I entered the room. Is anything wrong, sir?"

"Nothing—nothing. Tell the chauffeur to bring the car round—the Rolls."

Simmons went off wondering at his master's obvious agitation. Again Sir Henry stared at the improvised cigar-band. Nervously he looked at the back of it. The gum was still wet. Then he started to observe the original band at the back of the dressing-table. The transfer had certainly taken place but a few minutes before. Fear entered his eyes. He went to the window and stared out, but all he saw were diffused lights and drifting mist.

The car was ready. He went downstairs and passed through the hall. His uniformed chauffeur stood like a statue at the open door of the sumptuous vehicle, but Sir Henry never saw him. He saw only that drawing of a pair of scales.

"The club, sir?"

"Eh?"

"You are dining at the club, sir?"

"No. Drive me to Scotland Yard—quickly."

At the Yard, Sir Henry begged an interview with the Assistant Commissioner, but that official was otherwise engaged, and ultimately the caller was shown into the office of Inspector Brent. Brent was a comparatively young man, but one who had already made tremendous progress. He knew Sir

Henry by name and sight, but had never met him personally until this moment.

"I regret the Assistant Commissioner is not available," said Brent, "but I am at your service."

Sir Henry stared for a moment at the opposite wall, and then produced his cigar-case. He extracted the cigar bearing the strange sign and handed it to Brent.

"I found that—half an hour ago."

Brent exhibited immediate interest.

"In what circumstances?"

"I left the case on my dressing-table while I took my bath. On my return to the bedroom, that thing was there. When I left the case I swear the three cigars bore their original bands."

Brent raised his keen eyes.

"This signifies something to you?"

"Yes, I am a busy man, but I have time to read the newspapers. That is the sign of the Reckoner."

"It undoubtedly is. Have you any idea how he entered the house?"

"The bedroom window was open. It would be possible for an agile man to climb to it."

"And the motive?"

"There is none. I know nothing of the Reckoner—beyond what I have read. There was a good sum of money close to the case, but it was intact when I found it—also a valuable watch. Yet it must be a threat—a personal threat."

"Is there any person living who for some reason might have designs upon your life?"

Sir Henry gulped and hesitated.

"Of course, I have made enemies on occasion," he demurred. "It is inevitable with a successful business man. But I know of no person who would desire to—to murder me."

"That may be a premature conclusion."

"Yes—yes. But the last man to receive that warning was an old colleague of mine—Swinton. You—you know what happened to him?"

"He disappeared—suddenly."

Sir Henry's face moved convulsively.

"I do not wish to—disappear suddenly," he said. "I want protection from this scoundrel who calls himself the 'Reckoner.' I am entitled to protection as——"

Brent cut him short with a gesture.

"You shall have it. I presume you have received no other warning of this nature?"

"No. It was a complete surprise to me."

Brent took a few details regarding the position of the house and its occupants, and Sir Henry finally left. Brent walked up and down his office and exercised his capable brains. During the past six months the crimes attributed to the Reckoner had piled up. Almost in every case his crude sign of a pair of scales was found. Sometimes it preceded the crime, sometimes it accompanied it—scratched upon a window, or a door. His victims



were chiefly wealthy people, but not always. There were various inconsistencies. In one case—Swinton's—the victim had disappeared. In no single case so far had murder been actually proved.

Brent had collected a lot of minor facts. They went to prove that the person calling himself the Reckoner was young—judging from his agility and his voice. An old lag, sent to penal servitude for five years, swore that the Reckoner wore a delicately painted mask, through which only his eyes could be seen, and this was borne out by a pawnbroker who had been found tied to his bed, with his safe rifled. According to the pawnbroker, the face was more like that of a woman, with soft complexion and long eyelashes. But the voice was masculine—a curious, ringing voice in which was always the suggestion of a cynical laugh.

To Brent the Reckoner was a veritable nightmare—a bewildering spectre that baffled pursuit. His Chief was getting impatient, as was the public, and the fact that the great majority of the victims were highly placed persons put the police in a more invidious position than ever. While Brent was turning the latest incident over in his mind, his confrère Fulton entered the office. Inspector Fulton was an older man. He had not Brent's acute intelligence, but he made up for that lack by his long experience. Fulton knew every crook in the metropolis, their habits, haunts, and what not.

“Rotten night!” he said. “Anything doing?”

Brent pursed his lips, and pointed to the cigar which Sir Henry had left on the table. Fulton picked it up, and whistled.

"Who has received this little reminder?"

"Sir Henry Lush."

"Lush—Lush! Oh, I remember—the fellow who figured in that accident case. Too damn mean to insure his car, and fought a claim for damages. So he's gone and run foul of the Reckoner?"

"It looks like it."

"Wind up now, eh?"

"He seemed a trifle—perturbed. The trouble is, you can't get men like Lush to say much about their past. Too murky to be brought into the limelight. It helps the Reckoner to hide his identity."

"Clever devil!" growled Fulton. "Of course, this may be sheer bluff."

"It may, but the Reckoner isn't built that way. I believe he'll get Sir Henry, as he got Swinton, in spite of having forewarned him."

"That's where we come in."

"Yes. I propose to send Carroll to the house. Wren can relieve him. As a general rule the Reckoner acts swiftly. Lord, I'd like to get him."

Two days later, Harry Reynolds stood before an easel in his studio in Chelsea and gazed dreamily at the half-finished painting of a nude woman which had swiftly materialised under his masterly hand. It pleased him, because it had been achieved without the use of a model, and because he had got into the face of it the exact expression he wished to get.

He laid down his brush and palette, wiped his hands on his white overalls, and lazily lighted a cigarette. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and the light was going. Through the window he got a glimpse of the river—a barge or two making downstream on the swift tide, stark trees, and a leaden sky. Reynolds had painted that scene on two occasions, and had made fair prices. Now he was doing something to please himself. While he sat and mused he heard the telephone ring, and later the admirable Tony entered the studio to inform him that Miss Harmer was calling to see him.

“Cover up that masterpiece, Tony,” drawled Reynolds. “It isn’t everyone who can appreciate high art. Better brew some tea—China.”

Tony nodded, and immediately began to attend to the draping of the picture. But for a moment or two he stood and admired the thing. During the war he had been Reynolds’s batman, and an admirable one at that. While most of the officers in Reynolds’s platoon lived on “bully,” Reynolds



always found a young chicken or an outsize omelette. By what means these had been obtained he was too discreet to enquire. When the war ended, and Reynolds came back to civil life, Tony came with him, and continued to minister to his master's comforts with the same zest and loyalty as he had done during those bloody years in France. At half-past four Rose Harmer called.

She was close upon twenty-five, a strikingly beautiful girl, a little spoiled by having too much money lavished on her by her father, who had been a close friend of Reynolds's father—now dead. Unlike Reynolds, she was eminently practical, a bit of a snob and a lot of the autocrat, which was rather amusing when one reflected that old Harmer started life in the gutter. She gave Reynolds the tips of her fingers.

“Working, Harry?”

“Just a little. Horrible confession—what?”

“Why do you do it?”

“Oughtn't a man to do something—for a living?”

She laughed scornfully.

“I happen to know that you have three thousand a year private income, so that Socialistic stuff won't pass. Why don't you get into the open more—play golf, shoot, hunt——?”

“My dear Rose, I had enough shooting to last me all my life. Ask Tony. As for hunting—here I hunt the nimble goddess of inspiration, without

much success. Ah, here comes the tea. Now tell me all the news."

"Father is in a vile temper."

"That's stale news."

"But he is dreadful. I simply could not stay in the house. He went into some scheme with Sir Henry Lush, and I rather fancy that Sir Henry got the better of the deal in some way. Anyway, father had a conversation with Sir Henry over the telephone. I heard him using the most awful language. Ugh! The air was blue for miles. That leads up to something else. Have you heard about the man they call the 'Reckoner'?"

"The what?"

"Reckoner. It's just a sobriquet for a desperate criminal. Don't you read the newspapers—ever?"

"I really haven't much time."

"Humbug! Well, I saw Malcolm yesterday, and he told me in confidence—I suppose I oughtn't to tell you."

"Well, don't," drawled Reynolds.

"I'm going to. Sir Henry is scared out of his life. He went to Malcolm at Scotland Yard, and Malcolm is giving him police protection."

Reynolds stirred his tea and wrinkled his brows.

"Have I missed something?" he said. "Why does Sir Henry want police protection?"

"I told you. He received a threat from that man—the Reckoner. He is walking in fear of his life."

"Why?"

"What an absurd question! When the Reckoner threatens anyone, he always carries out his threat."

"But why should he threaten Sir Henry?"

"I don't know. Anyway, Sir Henry left his cigar-case on his dressing-table while he took a bath. When he came back, one of the bands had been removed from a cigar, and in its place was the sign of the Reckoner—a pair of scales."

"What an absurdly stupid thing to do! Why on earth didn't this ruffian strangle Sir Henry in his bath? It wouldn't take much longer than exchanging a cigar-band."

"I am only telling you what happened."

Reynolds drank his tea, and his quiet eyes twinkled.

"And does Sir Henry really take this thing seriously?"

"Of course, and so does Malcolm."

"Then it's time we reorganised our police force. It sounds more like a practical joke to me. I'm surprised at Brent wasting his time on such trifles."

"Harry, you don't understand. How could you—when your whole life is wrapped up in art. Malcolm is generally recognised as being one of the most brilliant men at Scotland Yard. You know, you have changed since the war. You and Malcolm used to be the fiercest of competitors in all games. I was only a girl then, but I can remember it. Then—then, when you came back, everything was

different. You seemed to go to sleep—you, the active, fighting Harry. Why—why?”

Reynolds smiled. There were many things Rose did not know. She had not been through that shambles. She had not seen her best chums—mere boys—falling like grain before the sickle of war. She could not realise the bitter disappointment of coming back and witnessing the results of victory—at home. Even Reynolds’s own father had taken an advantage of the situation to make profit from it—outrageous profits. Some of his ideals were smashed, but not all. A few were as deeply set as life itself.

“I just wanted to keep out of the fight,” he confessed. “Nature gave me a certain little gift. I love to indulge it. Brent is different—the pushing type of fellow. I leave him all the triumphs—the big thrills. And that reminds me; I haven’t seen him for over six months.”

“Then a surprise is in store. I have invited him to meet me here this afternoon. You don’t mind?”

“Not in the least. But what is the great idea?”

“Just a whim. I—I wanted to bring you two together again.”

“But——”

“Wasn’t there a quarrel?”

“Certainly not. We differed over some political question. Brent lost his temper and called me a damned something or other. But I had forgotten all about it. If we have not met since, it is merely



because we have so few interests in common. He moves among crooks and murderers, I among pigments and canvas. Malcolm's quite a good fellow. I'll warrant he doesn't even remember our squabble."

He got up and pulled the curtains. The red shaded light threw a warm glow over everything. Rose watched his every act with the eyes of a woman who is more than interested. As a young girl she had nurtured a secret love for Reynolds, and part of that love still remained. But he disappointed her now. All his interest seemed wrapped up in his work. He was charming, good-natured to the last degree, but extremely unresponsive to any emotional outburst on her part. His ambitions—he seemed to have none. While Brent was working his way ever upwards, Reynolds was quite content to paint a little and think a lot. He did not even want to be a great painter. It was deplorable to the ambitious Rose.

Brent put in an appearance five minutes later. Rose was apparently wrong in her deductions, for Brent greeted Reynolds quite cordially, and immediately made himself at home. He had an eye for good pictures, and his gaze wandered round the room, in which were various examples of Reynolds's work.

"So this is where you bury yourself away, Harry?" he said.

Reynolds nodded, and offered him a cigarette, which he declined.

"Bad for the nerves. I need all mine."

"Heavy work on hand?"

"Yes. The Reckoner is busy again."

"I told Harry," confessed Rose. "I hope I haven't betrayed a professional secret."

"It isn't a secret. Sir Henry is telling everyone. I think he is a little flattered to think that the Reckoner honours him with his attentions. At first he was scared, but that has worn off. He sails to-morrow for South Africa."

"Why does the Reckoner desire to avenge himself on Sir Henry?" asked Reynolds.

"The motive isn't clear. It never is clear. But I have a theory of my own."

"Do tell us," begged Rose.

"You remember the People's Bank?"

"Yes. It went broke a year ago."

"Exactly. Two months later, Swinton disappeared. He was a director of the bank."

"Well?"

"Sir Henry was also a director."

Rose stared as she saw the connection, and Reynolds furrowed his brows.

"I was in that, too," he said. "Are you suggesting that these disappearances—murders, perhaps—are all part of a plot for revenge because the depositors lost their money?"

"I am merely pointing out a peculiar coincidence. It was alleged that the thing was a swindle. As to that, I am not in a position to judge, but the enquiry

which followed certainly did reveal some rather strange facts."

Rose bridled at this.

"Why, father was chairman," she expostulated. "And Harry—Harry, you know it was just an ordinary failure?"

Reynolds remained dumb. He remembered well the smash-up, the fury of the depositors, the enquiry, and the masses of figures of which he could make very little. He had a shrewd idea that Harmer and Sir Henry had done well out of that, manipulating figures with consummate skill. One man had gone to prison—the cashier.

"It is an interesting theory," he admitted. "If there is anything in it, I too ought to receive a little *billet doux* from the Reckoner."

"You may yet," said Brent. "I imagine this man was a depositor, and that the loss of his money unhinged his mind. He is saturated with the desire for revenge, and he disposes of his victims rather neatly."

"Then you think that Sir Henry's life is in danger?"

"I do. But he may extend it by taking that pleasure-trip to-morrow."

"The theory doesn't cover everything," said Rose. "There have been crimes attributed to the Reckoner which can have no connection at all with the People's Bank."

"I think we shall fit them in when more light is shed upon the matter. Cunning as this man is, he will make a false step one day. In the meantime,

Sir Henry is being watched. If there is an attempt on his life, it may spell doom to the Reckoner."

The subject was abandoned, and ultimately Rose left with Brent. Reynolds sighed as they passed out, for he suspected that Rose's friendship with Brent almost merited another name. It was understandable. She loved men of action, and Brent was undoubtedly that. Then he uncovered his portrait of the woman, and looked long into her face. Dreams—dreams! He felt that Rose was going far beyond his reach.

### THE SPLENDID CRIME

### III

THAT night Brent dined with Rose and her father, at Harmer's invitation. It surprised Rose to find her lately outraged parent now quite calm and cheerful. The reason emerged during dinner.

"Lush is coming along to say good-bye," said Harmer. "He sails to-morrow."

Rose stared, for it was but a few hours since she had heard her father expressing his opinion of his business confrère.

"I thought——" she stammered.

"We compromised over a certain matter. I admit I lost my temper. Business, my dear; it turns us into raging lions. So you went to see Reynolds? Still playing about with paint, I presume?"

Rose nodded.

"Wasting his time. Harry has had every



opportunity to make a name for himself in another sphere. I could have given him a lift up, but he displays no interest in business. It's a pity—a very great pity. So unlike his father—one of the smartest men I knew."

After dinner, Rose was left alone with Brent for a considerable time, Harmer excusing himself on the plea that he had two important letters to write. The young people repaired to the drawing-room, and Rose played the piano. She chose deliberately romantic pieces, and Brent listened with his eyes focused intently on the player.

"How did you like that?" she asked, turning round.

"Exquisite! It reminded me of lilac and sunshine."

"You are almost as poetical as Reynolds."

"Must there be a comparison?"

"Not necessarily. But I used to play with Harry—accompany him. He is quite a good violinist, but of late he has been so wrapped up in himself."

"You think a great deal about him."

"Well, you and he are rather like brothers. I've watched your progress since I was able to think for myself. You and he were my two heroes. But somehow the war changed him."

"Perhaps it was money."

"What do you mean?"

"He was active and ambitious enough until his

father died. The old man was always very close with his money. Harry suddenly found himself in receipt of three or four thousand a year. Consider the effect of that upon a man who has been forced to live upon the pay of a captain. But, in any case, Harry is doing fairly well. There is quite a big demand for his pictures."

Rose pursed her lips. Her romantic temperament desired more than art to appease it. She had admired the dashing young captain who had won his M.C. near Ypres. The artist made very little appeal to her. For that reason her heart warmed towards Brent, whose successes were more dramatic. And Brent, full up as he was with his profession, had time to realise that Rose was beautiful.

"May I be frank?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Are you in love with Harry?"

She hesitated, and then shook her head. But Brent had doubts about that response, for there was a blush on her cheek, and the hands lying lightly on the keys of the piano moved a trifle nervously.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—yes. There was a time—when I was very young—I thought I—— But he was different then. I—I couldn't love a failure."

"I shouldn't call him that."

"I didn't mean it in any derogatory sense. I mean—Harry has not done himself justice. He was born to be a leader of men. Tony told me that

while he was in France he was that. His men loved him. They would have followed him to hell—Tony's expression. And then—then he comes back and buries himself in a top flat. Isn't it just a little disappointing?"

Brent knew not what to say. For a long time past he had been aware of a growing love for Rose, but he had refrained from telling her so, because he believed that there was a kind of understanding between her and Harry. Now the coast seemed fairly clear, and his heart gathered new hope.

"What a chance he has missed," he mused.

"The chance of being something great?"

He met her challenging eyes, and shook his head.

"The chance of winning something even more desirable than fame."

She divined his meaning, and grew a little agitated. Immediately she broke into a Chopin nocturne, but Brent laid his hand upon hers, and her flushed face came round.

"Rose. If——"

Whatever he was about to say was prevented by the arrival of Sir Henry.

"Good evening, Rose," he said. "And you, Brent—I never expected to find you here."

Brent smiled, but offered no explanation. Apparently Sir Henry had forgotten the warning from the Reckoner, for he seemed to be in a joyful mood, and looking forward to his holiday with the zest of a schoolboy.

"A relief to get away from this filthy climate. Rose, you ought to persuade your father to take a rest. Business is too strenuous these days—hardly worth the candle. I merely came to say good-bye. Where is your father?"

"In his study. I will tell him you have arrived."

She left the room, and Sir Henry sat down, and took it for granted that he might smoke. The sight of his cigar-case seemed to remind him of a certain fact. He looked up, to see Brent's eyes full on him.

"Thanks for your bodyguard, Brent. He has been a veritable leech."

"You have heard no more from the Reckoner?"

"No. It looks very much like a piece of bluff. Well, I am sleeping at the Ritz to-night, so all is well."

Brent nodded. In his mind he wished that an attempt had been made, for it would have given the police a chance to get on to the trail of the elusive phantom that was giving them so much trouble.

Harmer came in with Rose, and greeted Sir Henry quite warmly. All his enmity had vanished now—as it always did when he got what he wanted. Again he was the stout friend—the loyal business confrère.

"Good idea to get away for a spell," he said expansively. "Wish I could find the time."

"Why not?" asked Rose.

He pulled her ear playfully.

"'Men must work and women must weep,'" he quoted.



Rose merely smiled. Harmer's idea of work was sitting in a very comfortable chair, pulling a large number of financial strings, and watching the tape machine. When things went well with him, he was on top of the world. When they went adversely, he was a raging tempest—an unmitigated nuisance.

Sir Henry stayed for about an hour and then said his farewells. Brent lingered for another quarter of an hour, but Harmer's presence prevented him from continuing that broken heart-to-heart talk with Rose.

"I must go," he said. "I have to take a report at the office on a certain matter at ten o'clock."

"I'll come to the gate with you," said Rose. "I feel I need a breath of fresh air."

"Thanks. But it is very cold and foggy."

"I don't mind. I'll be back in a few minutes, father."

Harmer nodded, and settled down to a newspaper. Rose put on a coat and walked down the long drive with Brent. The fog lay in patches, which were slowly shifting under a rising breeze. Now and again, distant lights came to view, and the noise of outer London was borne to their ears—a dull, monotonous drone.

"Sir Henry seemed quite cheerful," said Rose.

"He has got over the shock of the warning—thinks it was bluff."

"You don't think that?"

"No. I believe an attempt would have been made but for the protection we gave him."

“So that is it? He has had a sort of body-guard?”

“Yes. A good man has been covering him ever since he received that warning. There was just a chance that he might be molested, but either no attempt was made, or the Reckoner was clever enough to spot our bodyguard.”

“I have been thinking over what you said about a crazy man desiring to avenge himself on certain people connected with the bank failure. If there is anything in that idea, my father might be in danger—and Harry too?”

“Well—yes,” he conceded.

“Oh, it’s horrible!”

He caught her hand and pressed it.

“There is no need to worry. We are moving heaven and earth to get this man, and I somehow fancy his lease of freedom is very restricted. The next attempt on his part may seal his doom. I am only one of a whole squad of men out to bring about his capture. Lord, I’d like to get my hands on him!”

She liked the deadly determination in his voice. Her heart warmed towards red-blooded men. How different from Harry, who seemed to live in dreams—dreams of an impossible world invented by his rich imagination.

“I am not worrying much,” she said. “And I hope that you will have your dearest wish granted, Malcolm. It may mean further promotion and——”

A low cry from Brent stopped her remark. He had halted, and was gazing at a black form that was lying in his path. A second's hesitation, and he ran forward and stooped down. The diffused light of a lamp in the drive shone on a pallid face—the face of Sir Henry Lush.

“Great God!”

“What—who——?” gasped Rose.

“Sir Henry—murdered—shot! Go back to the house, Rose—— Who is that?”

He rose swiftly before an approaching form, and it turned out to be Sergeant Carroll, in plain clothes. He was out of breath, and recognised Brent.

“How did this happen?” snapped Brent.  
“Did you not follow Sir Henry here?”

“I did. I waited under the yew-tree near the house. Sir Henry saw me when he emerged, and told me he was getting a taxi at the corner of the street, back to the Hotel Ritz. I followed him—just keeping him in sight. He was shot before my eyes.”

“What!”

“I saw the flash—from the tree yonder. I made for it at once, and got a glimpse of the murderer.”

“You saw him?”

“Only for a moment. I was about to use my automatic when the fog shifted a bit, and he was blotted out. The wall was only ten yards behind him—I could hear boots against bricks. I went after him, but I had no luck. I'm reckoned pretty

good at a short sprint, but he was better. I lost him in the crowd at the tube station."

"Can you describe him?"

"I only saw his back—for an instant. He was of medium height, and fairly broad. I think he wore a cap—but it isn't certain. Is Sir Henry——?"

"Dead." Brent gnashed his teeth, and Rose, who had been too scared to go to the house, came forward, wringing her hands.

"Was it—was it—the Reckoner?" she asked.

Brent nodded, and his muscular hands became clenched in his inarticulate rage. For the sixth time the Reckoner had beaten him. He felt his humiliation keenly.

"We must get the doctor, and the ambulance," he said. "Come with me, Rose."

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME

#### IV

IN a large room of an old and much dilapidated house near Wapping, three men sat and smoked restlessly. The eldest of them, a grey-haired man with an aristocratic type of face, was named Blackham, while his two much less sophisticated associates were styled Leeks and Rogers respectively. Blackham's contempt for his companions was marked at times, but they did not appear to notice it, for they were very obtuse creatures.

The worst that could be said about Blackham



was that he had a natural desire for easy money, and this was to some extent excusable, for the war had taken away one of his arms, and he now wore an artificial one in its place. His profession of draughtsman being thereby ruined, Blackham had drifted into dishonesty in order to maintain his daughter, who at that time was at boarding-school.

Leeks and Rogers came into his schemes later, and the three together eked out a precarious living until a certain person came into their lives, making their pilfering business more or less unnecessary. This extraordinary personage now completely dominated them. They admired him and feared him at the same time, and they did his bidding because it paid them to. But to-night the trio were ill at ease. Leeks had brought in an afternoon newspaper which contained news of a startling character.

"Things won't be safe after this," said Rogers, staring at the bold headlines. "I'm not agin doing a job or two of kinds, but when it comes to mur——"

"S-sh!" hissed Blackham. "We know nothing."

"But it's here——"

"I mean we must know nothing. It isn't our business."

"It darn soon will be," grumbled Leeks. "I tell you it ain't safe to work with him any longer."

"Hear, hear!" said Rogers. "I can always get a living without running my neck——"

Blackham silenced him with a quick gesture as a

very attractive girl entered the room. She was Ann, Blackham's daughter, and the only being in the world whom he really loved. At this period she was twenty-two, and kept house for her peculiar parent. Her expression was not that of a completely happy girl, for Ann had discovered certain facts about her father's life. The discovery, made a few months ago, that he lived on his wits startled her at first, but she had been compelled to accept the situation, because Blackham, in his pride, had given her the sort of education that was comparatively useless in the business world.

On one occasion she had run away, but had come back again on hearing that her father was ill. And then came the Reckoner—that strange, attractive character, bringing into Ann's life a completely new interest. She tried to wring from her father the truth about the Reckoner, but learned nothing. Her life was hedged round with mystery. In that house was a great basement, into which she was never permitted to go. Blackham kept the key, and at intervals he and Leeks, or Rogers, went—with food. That was a mystery still—one that she dared not mention for fear of arousing her father's wrath.

She stood before the trio now, apparently unconscious of the admiring glances of Leeks—a slender girl, on the fringe of womanhood, clearly expressing her timidity and fear of life—as she knew it.

“ Well, Ann ? ”

“ The telephone bell rang. It was—he.”

“ The Reckoner ? ”

“ Yes. He told me to tell you he was on his way here.”

Blackham nodded, and, seeing her eyes go to the newspaper, he casually folded it in order that she might not read what was printed on the front page.

“ Ask him in when he comes, Ann.”

She left them, and went to the smaller sitting-room, in which was a pile of socks and other male garments. Ann recommenced work on the socks with a big darning-needle, but her mind was otherwise engaged—her ears alert. More than once she had heard strange noises from the basement—that strange, forbidden place that extended under the whole of the house. She would not have endured the terrors she suffered but for the fact that she had a strong affection for her father. He had not always been what he was now. She recalled many happy days—years ago—when her mother was alive. Then her father had been a jolly kind of man—just back from the war, and hopeful of finding a good berth despite his disability. But bereavement followed, and a long spell of bad luck. Ann went away to school—and then everything changed.

She was startled from her thoughts by the ringing of the bell, and her heart bounded as she recognised that familiar triple ring. It was the Reckoner—come to keep his appointment. Her heart was a

mixture of fear and excitement. She went to the front door and opened it. Outside was a tall form, closely wrapped in a dark and rather tightly fitting coat, with the ample collar turned up. On his head was a felt hat pulled well down, and inclined over his right eye. The somewhat dim light revealed an extraordinary face.

It was more feminine than masculine, of high complexion, and utterly unmarred. The lips were full and red, and the eyes deepset and marvellously arrestive. In the full light of day a person of normal sight would have known it was a mask—an ingenious thing that was as plastic as human flesh, and which extended well down the neck and even over the ears—but in that uncertain light such a detection was difficult. Ann, however, was not deceived. She had seen it too often.

“Won’t you—come in?” she asked.

The Reckoner entered, and deposited his stick in the receptacle. Then he removed his black suède gloves and displayed two fine, strong hands, with supple fingers and well-manicured nails. Ann stood waiting with him, filled with an agitation that was very obvious.

“Why are you afraid?”

The question was put in a well-modulated, kindly voice, and the dark eyes seemed to be smiling. Ann smiled back.

“I’m not afraid—just startled. It’s that mask. Why—why must you wear it?”



The Reckoner laughed lightly.

"Merely a matter of convenience. I have been complimented upon it on more than one occasion. I am sorry if it does not meet with your approval."

"It's—hateful."

Again he laughed, as if he were highly amused at her inappreciation.

"Where is your excellent father?"

"In there—waiting for you."

"Alone?"

"No. Leeks and Rogers are with him."

"Good!"

He made for the door of the drawing-room, hesitated, and then came back to her.

"Ann."

She gazed at him, as a timid fawn might gaze at some strange intruder that had cornered it.

"Yes."

"Why did you come back?"

"I—had to. Father was ill. He is not capable of looking after himself. Rogers found me and told me father was dying. It wasn't true—but I stayed. He wanted me to stay."

"Why did you run away?"

"Because—because—— Oh, you know. I hate this life of mystery—this house of strange noises. Why—why do you come here? What is your business with my father?"

The Reckoner's lips became compressed. Then he nodded his head and left her, with her question

still unanswered. When he opened the door of the big room, three heads came round, and three very set faces confronted him.

"Ah, Blackham!" he said lightly. "How goes the world to-day?"

Blackham grinned, and his two companions gulped. Rogers vacated a comfortable chair, but the Reckoner declined to take it. His eyes were focused on the newspaper which Blackham had succeeded in hiding from Ann. He reached out, secured it, and unfolded it. Three pallid faces stared at him. They saw the two fine hands close like vices, and immediately the newspaper was rolled up and pitched across the room.

"So you have been reading—that?"

Blackham met the challenging eyes. He was a man of some courage, and was equal to the occasion.

"Yes," he growled. "That is the end."

"Of what? Please be explicit."

"Of our relationship. I engaged to do certain work. Oh, I'm not squeamish. I don't kick at trifles these days, but I'm not going to be implicated in murder—nor is Leeks or Rogers."

"No, by Gawd!" ejaculated Leeks.

"Not likely!" echoed Rogers.

"Quite unanimous," said the Reckoner in a dangerous voice. "I was under the impression that human intelligence had reached a higher plane in this decade of cheap education. So you have already tried me and found me guilty of murdering

an elderly gentleman of somewhat questionable morality by shooting him in the back on a dark night? Quite a compliment!"

The eyes flashed like fire, and even Blackham winced. The Reckoner went on:

"I will illuminate the dark recesses of your minds. I was interested enough to go to the scene of the murder, and I found something which the police had overlooked. It is rather an unsavoury object—this."

He produced from his pocket a matchbox, and inside it was a misshapen, sticky mass. Blackham took it and stared at it.

"Looks like chewing-gum."

"Precisely. Agitate your brains, my dear Blackham, and try to recall an intimate friend of ours who hails from Chicago, and who has a quite insatiable appetite for chewing-gum with a strong peppermint flavour—a professional gunman who on occasion does little jobs for another who prefers to remain in the dark."

"Jukes!"

"Wonderful!"

"You mean Jukes did that job for the Tiger—that it was a frame-up to put the blame on you?"

"Isn't that just the sort of thing the Tiger would do? He loves me so distractingly."

Blackham whistled. His doubts were vanishing. He had, in fact, been most reluctant to believe the Reckoner capable of murder. He saw it all now.

"By Jove! He wanted Lush—I know. He tried to pull off a double event. The best thing is to inform the police."

The Reckoner laughed scathingly.

"There is a charming old motto about 'an eye for an eye.' I prefer to deal with the Tiger myself—in due course. At the moment he is difficult to get, but later—— How is the prisoner?"

"The old man is in a bad way—groaning and weeping. It's six months since——"

"That is chiefly why I came. I intend to release Swinton this evening. He has suffered enough. A car is waiting outside Murphy's. You will take him to it immediately after I have left, and drive him to Hampstead. Drop him outside his house, then come away at once. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Give me the key. I will go down to him."

Blackham handed over a big key, and the Reckoner left by a door at the end of the room, walked along a passage, and unlocked a stout door that led into the big basement. Various passages led him to an old wine-cellar, the door of which was fastened by a big padlock. He possessed a key of his own to fit this, and was soon standing inside an arched recess. It was provided with electric light, and a touch on the switch illuminated the chamber.

In the far corner were a bed, a table, and a chair, a bookcase containing a dozen big tomes, some writing-paper, and pen and ink. Sitting on the



bed, with his hands manacled, and secured by chains in such a way that he could move about the chamber easily, was an elderly man with unkempt hair and fear-affrighted eyes. Once he had been corpulent, but now he was reduced to normal size. He blinked under the strong light, and then uttered a low ejaculation as he beheld that semi-feminine visage that was now so terrifyingly familiar to him.

"Mark Swinton!"

"Go away! Oh, God, why do you come to mock me?"

"On the contrary, I have come to bring you good news. Your sentence has expired."

"Expired! My God! No, you're playing with me. I know you—you're the Devil."

He commenced to whimper, and the Reckoner went forward and gripped his arm.

"Enough! Be a man. In an hour you will be in your own home, among the wealth you have accumulated at the cost of much human misery. Consider yourself lucky to have slipped through the meshes of the legal net by the power of wealth and position. Otherwise less mercy might have been shown you than I have shown. And in future try to win fame and glory by roads which are not red with the blood of the poor, on whose flesh you have hitherto battered."

Swinton mopped his expansive brow. He scarcely knew what the Reckoner was saying. The only thing that reached his mind was the fact that

no more terrible nights were to be spent in that foul place. Then a doubt came. He rubbed his hands together and took one step forward.

"You aren't playing with me?"

"I have given instructions. You will be taken from here to your own house very shortly. Good night!"

Swinton made no reply. His spirit was broken for the time being. All he could do was to sit and twist his fingers. The Reckoner went out.

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME



WHEN the Reckoner reached the drawing-room, Blackham was alone. His two associates had gone to play a game of billiards in a neighbouring saloon. The Reckoner took four five-pound notes from his pocket and passed them across to Blackham, who frowned as he picked them up.

"How much does your daughter know?"

Blackham looked up, and his mouth twitched.

"I don't know."

"She is to be trusted?"

"Yes. Ann is loyal—to me. She knows how damned hard hit I was. It was a blow to her when she discovered that I—I was a crook. Her first impulse was to run away. She did so, but came back later. Since then she has accepted the position."

"She mustn't stay here any longer."

"Eh?"

"She must have a chance—to live a decent life. I will see to it."

Blackham looked pleased, and then glum. His love for his daughter was his one saving grace, but he was selfish enough to want to retain her.

"What—what do you suggest?" he asked.

"I will think it over. Get Swinton away in a quarter of an hour. When the jail is empty, we may find another bright bird."

"It's a dangerous game."

"Life itself is dangerous. Try to keep Leeks off the drink, or the fool may raise trouble."

Blackham nodded, and the Reckoner left him. Outside, he found Ann. She made to open the door, but he stopped her and pointed to the small sitting-room.

"I want a word with you, Ann."

"In—there?"

"Yes. It concerns your future."

Ann followed him into the room, and he offered her a chair, in which she sat uneasily. His penetrating eyes were fixed on hers, until she flinched and fidgeted.

"You are a pretty girl, Ann."

"Why—why do you say that?"

"Because it is true. Tell me, are you happy here?"

"What is happiness?"

"A state of mind which does not make it necessary for one to ask that question. So you are not happy."

"No. I feel—I feel like a bird in a cage."

"A fairly good simile. We must open the cage."

"What do you mean?"

"You need the fresh air, the sunlight. You need to feel the magic potion of independence. You can find happiness, and give happiness. You must take a job."

"It is not so easily got, when one knows so little—and has no references."

"You have the reference of your own face. There are persons who would take you on that. Tell me what you can do."

"Practically nothing."

"Oh, come!"

She smiled wanly.

"I am afraid it is true. Of course, I can cook and mend and keep house. That has been forced on me. But I don't want to do that for anyone else."

"Naturally. Would you care to be a waitress in a very select restaurant? The sort of place where the *élite* meet—in a quiet part of the town. There is nothing derogatory in that—even for a well-bred girl."

"Is it possible?"

"It is a comparatively simple matter. Go to this address to-morrow morning, and simply say you are Ann."

He produced a pencil and the back of an envelope, and wrote down an address not far from Piccadilly.



Ann took the piece of paper, and he saw a look of gladness enter her eyes.

"You think I——?"

"I am sure."

"But my father——?"

"He approves."

She nodded and gulped. Then she looked at him curiously.

"I don't understand—you. They call you the Reckoner, and they say terrible things. I have tried to believe they are not true—that there is a misunderstanding. Are you a thief—a burglar, or is there——?"

"Does it matter? Is even a thief forbidden to do a decent act at times? Take this chance, Ann, and banish that sadness from your eyes, and laugh too—laugh and be sure that nothing evil can touch you so long as you are sure you are doing the right thing."

"And you—do you never laugh?"

"I am laughing now—behind this painted mask. Don't accept my outward vacuity as the reflection of my soul. Now good-bye, and good luck!"

She took the proffered hand, and felt her own held in a firm, warm grip. Two minutes later she was alone, sitting staring at the address on the square piece of paper. Then she smiled—more brightly than she had smiled for a long time—and went to her father.

"I'm going after a job," she said.

Blackham compressed his lips.

"The Reckoner fixed that?"

"Yes. He said you approved."

"You want to leave me, Ann?"

"No. I shall still come home to sleep. But I want to do something for myself. Do you think it is all right, or just a hope that will never materialise?"

"The Reckoner is sure of himself. I oughtn't to stand in your way, Ann. There is a lot you don't understand, and some things I do not understand. Do as he bids you, Ann. He knows best."

"You—you have never seen him without the mask?"

"No. He never reveals his face."

"I wonder—I wonder what he really looks like?"

Blackham glanced at her sharply. He saw there in the querulous face something that Ann was trying her best to conceal. It overlaid mere curiosity—a momentary reflection of her soul—and it told Blackham much. He bit his lip with vexation, for he did not want that to happen with Ann. On the trail of the Reckoner were the sleuth-hounds of the law. One day, perhaps—— Then he remembered the Reckoner's instructions.

"I want you to go to the post-office, Ann, and buy some postal orders. There is just time before they close."

She went off a little later. Blackham took a big mask from a drawer, donned it, and hurried down to Swinton, who was aching with impatience. The

prisoner's handcuffs were removed, and he was conducted along a passage that gave access to the street close to where the car was waiting. . . . Less than an hour later Mark Swinton staggered up the wide steps that led to his front door, and rang the bell.

*THE SPLENDID CRIME**VI*

THE magical return of Swinton was a veritable bombshell to his family and to the police. On the following morning, Brent paid him a visit, and found him in bed, pallid but immensely pleased with himself. Swinton told his story—so far as it went. He had been taken from his house late at night, blindfolded and gagged, to an unknown address. For six weary months he had suffered hell, in a miserable stone cell, fed by a man in a black mask, and visited at intervals by that devil, the Reckoner. He had not the remotest idea of the locality of the house in which he was kept a prisoner, nor of the identity of the person who had acted as jailer.

“How long did it take you to get there?”

“An hour or so.”

“When you were brought back, did you see the car?”

“No. My eyes were blindfolded. I was shot out on the heath near this house, and before I could remove the bandage the car had disappeared.”

“But you saw the Reckoner?”

"Yes—three times."

"Describe him."

"I—I can't. No description will fit him."

"Oh, come!"

"I mean as regards his face. It was not a human face. It—it was devilish—beautifully devilish. I believe it is neither man nor woman——"

"A mask. We know that."

"It couldn't be. I should have known. And the voice—musical, cynical at times——"

"Height?"

"Taller than me—say nearly six feet—well built, broad at the shoulders——"

Brent made a few notes, but they were of small value, for the mask might well have concealed anything. It was even unsafe to judge a man's age by his voice.

"And the motive?" he asked.

Swinton winced. He was not keen to discuss that. Posing as a benevolent business man, a subscriber to various charities, and leader of several campaigns against the sins of the flesh, he was reluctant even to confess that one man at least considered him to be a particularly dirty sort of profiteer, who had so far managed to conceal his dishonest ramifications.

"I can only conclude the Reckoner is a lunatic, with a grudge against society. He hates the man above him—hates everyone who stands for the common decencies of this country."



"It had nothing to do with the People's Bank?"

"Why should it? The bank failed—as many other good things have failed through business upsets, strikes, and lock-outs. That is common knowledge."

"But the Reckoner may think differently. Perhaps you have not yet heard that during your absence Sir Henry Lush has been murdered."

"What!"

"The facts are clear. He received the same warning that came to you. He was shot dead in the grounds of Harmer's place."

Swinton went pale with horror. Lush dead, and he had got off comparatively lightly. It was amazing—stupendous!

"I am just wondering why in the one case it was murder and in the other merely abduction," mused Brent. "The Reckoner seems to be a trifle inconsistent."

. . . . .

When Swinton recovered from his incarceration, he was besieged by friends who were keen to hear the story from his own lips. But he refused the majority of them. It simply would not do to have that adventure bruited about. Then came an invitation from Harmer, and that Swinton accepted.

Rose came to Reynolds one afternoon, and found him busy on a new picture, and so immersed in it that she entered the studio and sat near him for five minutes before he seemed to realise that she was there.

"Why, Rose!"

"So you have just woke up! Harry, must I always come here to drag you into life? You look tired."

"I have been hard at it. The gentle muse sometimes deserts me. I must go hammer and tongs while she stays. Can I offer you some tea?"

"No, thanks. I want you to come and have dinner with us to-night."

"Is it a command or a request?"

"Both. Swinton is coming."

"The resurrected one. That was a queer happening. I saw it in the newspaper, but it seemed to me that they were hiding something. What really happened to Swinton?"

"That is what we want to know. You must come, Harry. It concerns all of us."

"How?"

"Well, you know Malcolm's theory."

"I shouldn't place much reliance on that. After all, your father was the leading spirit in the People's Bank, and there has been no attempt at abduction or molestation."

"But there may be. I'm worried a little, Harry—particularly since that awful shooting of Sir Henry. This man they call the Reckoner—he must be mad."

"If so, you may trust Brent to get him. Madmen make many serious blunders."

"You *will* come?" she reiterated.

"Would it give you all that amount of pleasure?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles it. I suppose I must make myself thoroughly uncomfortable by enclosing my breathing apparatus in a boiled shirt?"

"You savage!"

She left soon after, and Reynolds called the worthy Tony, who had been occupying his time in redecorating his own room. He was smothered in whitewash, but appeared to be enjoying himself immensely.

"Behold! Another wielder of the brush," said Reynolds. "But you allow too much to escape, my dear Tony. If I did that, I should be a walking rainbow."

"These blooming brushes, cap'n," snorted Tony. "They leaks like a sieve. I've drunk about a gallon."

"Better take a bath—after me. And you can look out my glad-rags. We are going to a dinner."

"We!"

"That is the kingly pronoun. It means *I*."

Reynolds turned up at Harmer's house, to find Mark Swinton already there. He knew the old rogue through his association with the busted bank, but found him somewhat changed after his strange adventure—not quite the man he was.

"Ah—Reynolds! Haven't seen you for months. They tell me you are quite a name now in the world of art."

"They exaggerate. When you condescend to

buy one of my pictures to hang beside your Corots, Gainsboroughs, and Constables, I shall grow two inches."

"But I already have a Reynolds—a *Joshua* Reynolds—ha! ha!" cackled Swinton mirthlessly.

"Good—damn good!"

Throughout dinner nothing was said about the Reckoner business, but it was clear that Harmer was anxious to hear about it. The subject was broached in the drawing-room over coffee.

"There isn't much to tell," said Swinton. "My house was broken into two nights after I received that little drawing. A towel or something was placed over my mouth, nose, and eyes, and I was taken away—and tortured for six solid months."

"Tortured!"

"Mental torture. Can you imagine what it is like living in a stone cell day after day, seeing no one but a man in a mask—and the devil who planned it—the Reckoner? They gave me food—horrible food—and I was permitted to write—but not letters. At nights I thought I should go mad. There were rats—ugh!"

"But why?" asked Reynolds.

"Why? Because this fiend in human form—this demented creature whom the police are too damned silly to catch—had a grudge against the well-to-do. Why was Lush so cruelly murdered? I warn you, Harmer, he hasn't finished yet. Once he mentioned you."



"Me!"

"Just casually. He called you—well, something I shouldn't care to repeat."

Rose looked terrified, and Harmer clenched his fat hands. But Harmer was no coward. He changed his expression of astonishment to a smile of contempt.

"I am ready for him—if he chooses to call," he said. "What do you think of all this, Harry?"

"It would be most amusing if it were not so serious. What is surprising is that the police do not round him up."

"They cannot perform miracles," argued Swinton. "I have no idea where I was imprisoned. I could not identify my jailer, nor the Reckoner without his mask. He is cunning. He has henchmen to assist him, all of whom are doubtless too involved to give him away—even if they could."

"But he makes the stupid blunder of warning his intended victims."

"It merely proves that he is a bold man, a man sure of himself," said Rose. "But every soul is against him now. Poor Sir Henry was shot in the back. Horrible!"

Swinton nodded, and begged that Rose would play the piano in order to relieve the conversation of its grimness. Reynolds found her a sonata at which she was particularly good, and stood by the piano to turn over the pages for her. Before she could start, there was a knock at the door, and

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Harmer's butler entered. He carried a letter on a tray.

"Pardon, sir; it is for Mr. Reynolds, and I thought it might be of an urgent nature."

Reynolds furrowed his brow as he took the letter. It simply bore his name, without any address.

"Queer!" he muttered. "Why should anyone write to me and leave it here?"

With a shrug of his shoulders he opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper, and on it was inscribed a pair of scales.

"Well, I'm——!"

"The Reckoner!" gasped Swinton. "He wants—you!"

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## VII

THREE pairs of eyes were riveted upon Reynolds. He turned the sheet of paper over, crumpled it into a ball, threw it into the fireplace, and laughed.

"You think it is a joke?" queried Swinton in hushed tones.

"It is certainly a mistake. I can think of nothing that I have done which might cause the Reckoner to desire my blood."

"You were connected with the People's Bank," suggested Harmer. "That might be sufficient."

Reynolds shook his head. He refused to take the threat seriously, and begged Rose to play the piano. But Rose was far too agitated.

"Malcolm ought to know about this—at once," she said.

"I agree," put in Swinton. "If Harry had suffered as I have, he wouldn't take this threat so calmly. We ought to leave no stone unturned that may help to put the police on that man's track. Think of poor Lush."

Reynolds was indifferent. He had no objection to Rose trying to get in touch with Brent, but he could not see how the incident of the note would help the detective. So Rose telephoned Scotland Yard, and learnt that Brent was not on duty. A second call to Brent's flat met with success. He arrived at Harmer's house within half an hour.

"Hello, Harry!" he said. "How do you do, Mr. Swinton? Rose telephoned me, but was somewhat secretive. Is anything amiss?"

"Yes," said Harmer. "You will be interested to hear that Harry received this about half an hour ago."

He handed Brent the crumpled sheet of paper which he had retrieved from the fender. Brent pursed his lips when he saw the scales.

"Where is the envelope?" he asked.

It was still lying on the top of the piano. Swinton found it, and passed it to Brent, who scanned it closely.

"Just the name! Of course, it was delivered by hand. Did it come here?"

Reynolds nodded.

"That's rather curious! There must be a

reason for that. How many people knew that you were coming here to-night, Harry?"

"Just we four—and my man, Tony."

"You were not conscious of being followed here?"

"No. That never occurred to me."

"I should like to speak to the butler."

He spent a few minutes with the man, and elicited the fact that the letter had been pushed under the front door, without a ring or summons of any kind. The butler had seen it lying half exposed.

"There is a letter-box in the door?"

"Yes, sir. It surprised me that the letter should be under the door and not in the box. I brought it to Mr. Reynolds immediately."

The butler was dismissed, and Brent folded the paper carefully and retained it—along with the envelope. Then he left the room, and spent a quarter of an hour in the grounds.

"No sign of anyone outside," he said. "Now why was that warning left here, when Harry is such an infrequent visitor?"

"If I was followed, as you suggested, the reason is fairly clear," said Reynolds. "He possessed a fountain-pen, paper, and envelope, and lost no time in letting me know that my movements were under observation. Let's forget it."

"Forget it!" exclaimed Rose. "Why, it may be dangerous for you to leave this house to-night. How can you be so—so casual in the face of what has happened?"



"You think I might meet with a fate similar to Sir Henry's?"

"Isn't it possible? If this desperate murderer can shoot an elderly man in the back, isn't it just as likely that you——?"

Reynolds shook his head.

"I have a theory that the Reckoner knows his victims, and that that fate is not reserved for me."

"Why should it not be?" demanded Brent.

"Because I got not one penny profit from the People's Bank."

"Do you suggest that Lush did?" asked Harmer huffily, feeling that his own honesty was in question.

Reynolds shrugged his shoulders. For Rose's sake he did not care to express himself frankly on that matter. But Swinton looked very uncomfortable.

"Malcolm, what do you think?" asked Rose.

"This is a serious threat, and one that cannot be ignored. We know very little about the Reckoner, but there is little doubt that he is mentally deranged—a one-purpose creature who makes no vain threats. I feel bound to tell you that, Harry."

"Thanks! I have no doubt he feels he has a grudge against me. But I don't interpret his message in quite the same way as you, Brent. There is a certain amount of method in his madness; He may be satisfied in scaring me, or kidnapping me on a quite mistaken charge—as he did Mr. Swinton. But we shall see."

Brent stayed on, and a little music was indulged

in, but it was obvious that the delivery of that note had upset the whole atmosphere of the place.

"I'll see you as far as your flat, Harry," said Brent.

"No, you will not."

"Don't be such a stubborn mule."

"My dear policeman," retorted Reynolds, "my freedom—or my very existence—may, or may not, be imperilled, but I haven't yet reached the stage when I cannot take care of myself."

"Harry, is it wise——?" pleaded Rose.

But he was adamant, and left the house by himself. Brent lingered a little longer, with the idea of getting a few quiet minutes with Rose. But she was in no mood to listen to soft words. At the back of her mind was the feeling that the reach of the Reckoner was long, and that her father was not immune. Also she was thinking of Reynolds, with that grim threat hanging over his head.

"You ought to have gone with him, Malcolm," she said.

"How could I? He is so sure of himself." His lip curled a little. "The fact is, he hasn't a great opinion of the police. We jar on his artistic soul. Harry lives in a world of make-believe. Even murder doesn't wake him up. It's a pity—a great pity."

. . . . .

In the meantime, Ann Blackham had carried out the Reckoner's instructions. She donned a neat black dress of her own designing and called at the

address given her. It was a comparatively small restaurant lying between Oxford Street and Piccadilly Circus, with its name inscribed boldly in gold lettering on the plate glass window—*Kettering's*. Her first impression was a pleasant one, for the curtains were clean and artistic, and the furnishings good.

"I want to speak to the manager," she said, and was shown into a small office on the half-landing. It was occupied by an elderly man, who had apparently just arrived, for he was in the act of unlocking the safe. He ran his eye over her and smiled.

"Are you—Ann?"

"Yes. I was told——"

"That's all right. I understand you are looking for a job as waitress?"

"Yes."

"No experience, eh?"

"I am afraid not."

"Well, it won't take you long to acquire that. I'm Kettering, and like to look after my own business. That's why it is a success. The manageress will be here in a few minutes. I'll get her to take you in hand. The girls don't arrive until eleven. You'll find the dressing-room on the landing above. That dress will do very well, but you'll need a cap and apron. Firm provides those."

Ann was subsequently introduced to the manageress, a Mrs. Rogan, who appeared to approve of her in a restrained sort of way. The other girls arrived—six of them, including the cashier—and

Ann soon found herself an integral part of the daily machine. She had an hour in which to study the menu, and make herself acquainted with the working of the establishment.

That awful first day passed, and Kettering complimented her before she left. As the Reckoner had averred, the patrons of the restaurant were, on the whole, prosperous and refined persons, but there was a smattering of the commoner types. Ann, with her trim figure, warm brown eyes, and clustering curls, was bound to create an impression, and the blush of nervousness inevitable to such an ordeal enhanced her fresh beauty. More than one discriminating bachelor decided to change his table in future.

Blackham was reading a newspaper when Ann arrived home. The place was untidy, plates and dishes lying about everywhere, for Blackham had had to get his own meals, pending the engagement of a maid, which was not an easy matter in the circumstances. He kissed Ann, and looked at her anxiously.

“You got the job?”

“Yes—and started right away. Two pounds a week—and tips.”

Blackham winced at this. The idea of Ann working—waiting on people—was repugnant to him. Inwardly he cursed the Reckoner for putting this idea into her head, and yet even that was better than losing her.

“What sort of a place is it?” he asked.



"Quite nice—not at all the usual type of restaurant. The staff are all well spoken, and Mr. Kettering is more like a—a relative than an employer. I think I am going to like it very much. It was good of the Reckoner to help me, wasn't it?"

"He must have some sort of a pull over Kettering. People don't usually employ a girl without references. Were you asked any questions about—your parents?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Kettering expected me."

"Hm! Pity I couldn't have got you into an office."

"Why?" asked Ann. "What difference is there?"

"You will be exposed to all sorts of—familiarities."

"Father, you don't understand. A girl meets that almost everywhere. Doesn't it depend upon herself? There's a girl at Kettering's. Her name is Molly, and she is really awfully nice, but she invites confidences on the part of the customers. I think men soon get to know when a girl doesn't welcome any familiarities. Now I'll get you some dinner."

She donned an apron, and was soon putting the place in order, humming a light air as she did so. One day of useful, honest work had changed her. She blessed the Reckoner for the chance he had given her. But mingled with this new lightness of heart was a vestige of the old doubting. This strange man, who controlled her father, of whose inner life she knew nothing, what was his real

character? He had helped her, and she had accepted his help, because it involved nothing that was not honest. But his mysterious relations with her father were of a different hue. It seemed to her that ultimately she must cut herself adrift from him and from her father—unless she could induce her parent to leave the trail of “easy money” and utilise his undoubted abilities in honest directions. Success depended upon herself. She must work her way up and up—until they were independent of the Reckoner.

Such reflections seemed ungrateful, but somehow she felt that that was what the Reckoner himself had in mind when he made this suggestion to her. She could not blame him for her father’s mode of existence. Long before the Reckoner appeared on the scene Blackham was living a dishonest life, with Leeks and Rogers as his accomplices.

The days passed, and Ann grew to like her work. It was a pleasant change from that damp, brooding house. She was in another world—a world less charged with drama. Kettering employed a good string trio, and at night-times in particular the little restaurant was gay and bright. Ann kept herself much to herself, but it was inevitable that she should mix with her fellow-waitresses and engage in conversation. Her noticeable reticence to discuss her private affairs caused a certain amount of gossip.

“Bit of a mystery,” said the loquacious Molly. “Never wants to go for a bit of a bust. I wouldn’t

mind betting some fellow has turned her down recently."

"She's a nice kid, anyway," put in Laura. "If I had her looks I'd get into the 'movies.'"

"She's collared all my best customers," sighed another girl. "The last victim is Mr. Reynolds."

"Who is Mr. Reynolds?"

"The nice-looking, dreamy man who used to sit at No. 9, near the orchestra. I know that's his name, because someone rang him up on the telephone and I had to find him. He's a painter, I believe."

"Well, you can't blame Ann for that," said Laura. "They never get any change out of her. If your friend Reynolds tries, he'll soon find his nose out of joint."

"He isn't that sort," said the girl. "I—I wish he was."

They all laughed, but Ann did not hear them, for at that moment she was busy attending to the requirements of Harry Reynolds, who had dropped into the restaurant particularly early.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## VIII

"BEASTLY night," said Reynolds, as Ann brought him a Dover sole. "When does the band start?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Not quite so busy as usual."

"We shall be. It is early yet."

"Of course. You haven't been here long, I believe?"

"Not very long."

Her answers were curt, but never impolite. Reynolds realised that this girl took her job seriously. She was certainly an asset to the place, for none of the other waitresses could boast of real beauty. Reynolds, having made a study of that, could find time to appraise the delicate mould of her nose, chin, and neck—the soft complexion so pleasantly free of make-up.

"Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, thank you."

Ann, on her part, treated him exactly as she did her other customers, but had she been asked she would have admitted he was rather nice. He came fairly regularly, and seemed to have a passion for good music. When the band was playing something particularly fine, Reynolds would sit back, as if in a dream, and make scarcely a movement until the last note was played. Somehow he stood out clear of the rest of the patrons of the place—a man of dominating personality despite his apparent lassitude.

"Billie says he's a painter," said Molly. "Not a house-painter; an artist."

"Really!"

"A little bit keen on you, Ann."

Ann's eyes flashed.

"What nonsense you talk," she said.



"Well, he left Billie's table to go to yours."

"Because he appreciates music."

"Gentlemen prefer blondes," quoted Billie.

"It's a lie. I'm as blonde as a vanilla blanc-mange. The fashion's changing——"

Ann laughed good-humouredly, for Billie was an artist in her facial expressions. These girls got quite a lot of fun out of life, and most of it was innocent enough. Ann simply carried on, regarding her present job as a first rung on a long ladder—a ladder that might lead to a life free from regrets, a life of regeneration so far as certain persons were concerned.

One night she arrived home to find the place as untidy as usual. She was a little tired, for the day had been a strenuous one, and she thought it was time her father took over the responsibility of the house.

"What a litter!" she said. "Father, you must get a maid—or help of some kind."

"I've got someone coming."

"When?"

"To-morrow. But are you tired of looking after me, Ann?"

"No, no. But my time is so taken up—at the restaurant. It's horrible to come home and see the place looking like a pig-sty. But if you have engaged a woman——"

"I haven't. I've engaged a man."

"A man! But a man is no use."

"Is that your opinion of my sex?"

"You know what I mean. He wouldn't do the little things that are necessary—the sweeping and dusting and cleaning. You must get a woman—a daily woman if you can't get one to sleep in."

Blackham shook his head stubbornly. He scarcely liked to tell her that his reason for employing a man—one known to him—was a diplomatic one. He wanted no woman "nosing" around in that particular house.

"You must let me have my own way, Ann," he said. "Do hustle up some food. I've had nothing since noon."

She was frying him a chop when the hall bell rang—twice. Anxiously she awaited the third ring—that triple alarm which always announced the Reckoner. But it did not come. This late caller was not the man she wished to see in order to thank him. With a sigh she answered the summons, and, on opening the door, found herself confronting a big form, closely muffled in a coat and woollen scarf. A pair of ferocious, deeply-set eyes ranged over her form, and the hard, long mouth twisted.

"So you are Ann?"

"Whom—whom do you wish to see?" she asked.

"Your father. Oh, there is no need to tell him. He will be quite interested to see me—again."

"But——!"

He pushed by her, and halted by the door of the sitting-room.

“In here?” he growled.

Her resentment and fear rendered her mute. But the caller took silence for an affirmative reply. He opened the door, and entered the room where Blackham was sitting. The effect of this intrusion upon Blackham was electrical. He sat bolt upright in his chair, placed the newspaper on the table, and stared vacantly. The visitor removed his ample scarf slowly, and then his hat. He was an impressive figure—a man of outrageously large features, from his great sunken eyes to his enormous hooked nose and thin-lipped mouth.

“You seem—surprised?” he said.

“Anton!”

“Yes—Anton the Tiger. Not a pleasant pseudonym, and so inappropriate, as you have cause to know. And how is the world treating you, my friend?”

“Why—why have you come here?” gasped Blackham.

“Merely to revive an old acquaintanceship. It was in Paris that we last met—the Café Girondin, in Montmartre. I think we indulged in a rather foolish quarrel, as a result of which we—we parted company?”

“I do not wish to be reminded of that. All that is over and done with. I have settled down here—living on a miserable pension——”

The Tiger laughed amusedly—a laugh that caused Blackham to wince. He feared but two men in the

world ; one was the Reckoner, and the other this loose-lipped, sinister figure who was leering at him now.

"Let us talk !" snapped the Tiger, with a sudden change of expression.

"About—what ?"

"Business. There is a small matter in which I need assistance. Quite a trifling affair, but promising."

"I tell you——"

The Tiger held up the index finger of his right hand. It lacked the end joint, and the sight of it—wagging as Blackham had often seen it wag—caused the expostulating man to stop his protestations.

"As I was saying, it is quite a simple little business, involving little risk. For hazardous affairs I have other—assistants. You have a daughter——"

Blackham's mouth tightened, and an ugly look entered his eyes. Here, as ever, was his one saving grace. Ann to him was sacrosanct.

"You will be good enough to leave my daughter's name out of this," he said.

"My dear Blackham, that is rather impossible, for everything hangs upon her ability to play a part. In truth, I had forgotten her very existence, but a certain friend of mine happened by chance to observe a particularly charming waitress in a quite respectable restaurant up West. A few subtle enquiries elicited the fact that she was none other



than the daughter of your worthy self. Rather a remarkable coincidence, since it occurred just at the moment when I was in need of a fair helper."

Blackham rose to his feet, his face scarlet with resentment. He pointed to the door with his left arm, his false limb hanging loosely by his side.

"Better go!" he said thickly. "Ann is straight, and I wouldn't have her associated with you for all the wealth of the Indies. The past is closed, Anton, as between me and you."

"Do you really think so?" The awful eyes glowed like living coals. "You poor fool! One little word from me and you would experience the inside of a jail again. I have documents, exhibits—enough to get you hanged. If this paternal affection is reciprocated, Ann might miss her dear papa. Listen to what I have to say."

"No."

"So you can look with contempt upon such a nice little sum as five hundred pounds?"

"Yes—if it embroils Ann. In any case, I am through with that sort of life."

"Completely regenerated, eh? I might swallow that, Blackham, if I didn't happen to know quite a lot about your recent movements. I gather you prefer working for the Reckoner?"

"The Reckoner!"

"Yes. That blundering fool who will land you in Queer Street before long. You fly into paroxysms of rage when I suggest a little job for Ann,  
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but you do not exhibit the same resentment when the Reckoner uses her for his little schemes."

"You lie!"

"You will see. The little mouse runs splendidly, but pussy has her claws well sharpened. One spring and—— Really, I am amazed at your stupidity. When the Reckoner has done with Ann——"

Blackham could stand no more. He stooped and picked up a stout poker.

"Get out!" he said thickly. "Get out before——before——"

The Tiger merely laughed. Such theatricals did not disturb him in the least.

"You will do just as I say," he mused, "because you cannot afford to do otherwise. When you are ready, telephone me at Gerrard 23718. But it must not be later than Saturday next. I will then tell you the details that are to be followed. In the meantime, should you see the Reckoner, tell him that an old account is piling up, and settlement day is approaching. Thanks, but I can find my way to the door."

But Blackham followed him, lest he should speak to Ann, and slammed the door after him with violence. Ann emerged from the kitchen, slightly pale and anxious.

"Who—who was it, father?"

"The devil himself. By God, if what he said is——"

“What did he say?”

“Nothing—nothing. Get me some food, child. I—I am a little distraught.”

The incident left Ann very uneasy. She had heard none of the conversation between her father and the strange visitor, but a glance at both their faces when they emerged from the room was sufficient to convince her that a quarrel had taken place. On the following morning the new “servant” arrived. He was a most unprepossessing youth, with a cadaverous countenance, protruding ears, and shaven head, and he brought with him a cheap tin box. Where Blackham had picked him up was a mystery. Ann was amazed.

“Is that the man you were mentioning?” she asked.

“Yes. A useful fellow. Been to sea a good deal, and can do anything. He was highly recommended by his late employer.”

“And who was his last employer—a prison governor?” she asked tartly.

“Ann!”

She avoided a quarrel by leaving him abruptly. Home! It was becoming more impossible than ever. But a few days later she was compelled to admit that the “maid”-of-all-work was not such a bad character as he had appeared to be. His name was Timothy Bright, and he made up for Nature’s oversights and blemishes by possessing a rich sense of humour. Moreover, he was not afraid of work.

"Miss Ann," he said, "you wouldn't think that once I was on the music-hall stage, eh?"

"I certainly should not. What were you doing there?"

He winked solemnly.

"Back legs of a mule in a funny act. Rotten job, that. I got all the kicks. I chucked it and went to sea."

That was about the full extent of his autobiography. What he did after he left the sea he never would say, but Ann had a shrewd idea that police-courts and prisons figured among his experiences. Such was the environment of her home life—a brooding father, a serio-comic domestic help of doubtful integrity, Leeks and Rogers representing the social side, and the Reckoner. Little wonder she appreciated her job—and the chance that it offered to give her contact with a different world.

"Ever been in love, Ann?" asked Molly one evening, apropos of nothing.

"Never," replied Ann emphatically.

"Then you ought to have your blood-pressure tested. Now, there's that Mr. Reynolds trying to be awfully nice to you, and you just freeze him out."

"What nonsense you talk," sighed Ann, more in pity than in anger. "Can't a man be civil to a girl without her going into hysterics? He'd be decent to any girl. He simply couldn't be otherwise. There's a man losing his temper at No. 22."



Molly sailed off to attend to the irate customer, and Ann smiled to herself. Love, with Molly, was a perpetual disease. It enclosed her whole life; she could think of little else. But Ann had other things to reflect upon. Life had not served her too well, so far. It had laid upon her the finger of shame that yet was black and stubborn. She knew perfectly well that for years her father had supported her on money got by no honest means. That had to be lived down, and it was not easy.

Then a curious thing happened. Her attention for some days past had been drawn to a man who began to take his meals at Kettering's. There was nothing unusual in his appearance, but she had the uncomfortable sensation of being closely watched. At first she was inclined to put it down to imagination, but on two occasions she saw this same man on the bus that took her home.

She grew very uneasy, but strove to comfort herself by arguing that doubtless he lived at her end of the metropolis, and his apparent interest in her was due to the fact that they were fellow-travellers, though she had not realised it until then. On the bus he made no attempt to get into conversation, but sat reading the evening newspaper during the whole journey. When she alighted, he did so too, but walked in the opposite direction.

On the following week she started a period of late duty. This involved staying at the restaurant until closing-time, which was anything between ten and

eleven o'clock. On the Tuesday evening a dense fog invaded London. Ann saw it through the plate-glass doors of Kettering's, and faced the prospect of a painfully slow journey home. That night Reynolds turned up late, and stayed until closing-time.

"Horrible weather," he said.

"Yes. Isn't it clearing?"

"No. Worse than ever. Do you live far from here?"

Ann shook her head. She had an idea he was going to suggest seeing her home, and this she was not at all prepared to consider. But he merely smiled, and asked for his bill.

"You are lucky," he said. "All the buses and trains are late. The tube is the only punctual thing. Good night!"

She was vastly relieved, for she had got to like him. Tired out, she went to the dressing-room to change her clothes, and was entertained by Molly, who was expatiating on the climate of her native city.

"Nice sort of game to play on a girl when she's tired out! Why, I won't be home until the milk-man calls. Billie, you've got a gorgeous new ladder in your stocking."

"Who cares?" snorted Billie. "No one can see a yard. You coming my way, Ann?"

They stood in Piccadilly Circus, peering through the fog at the numbers on the packed buses. At last Ann identified hers, and fought her way on it. She waved her hand to Billie, and was instantly

submerged in a sea of mist. . . . She dozed through the latter part of the prolonged journey, and woke with a start to find herself at her destination. It was but ten minutes' walk to the house, and she hurried along the greasy pavements to keep warm.

Two minutes passed, and then she had a feeling that she was being followed. She swung round, but could see nothing, for the fog was thick and the street ill-lighted. Perhaps it was the echo of her own footsteps! On again—faster. Here and there a very dim light—and no pedestrians, for it was past midnight. Again she heard that curious “pad, pad” in her rear. She paid no attention to it. It was but a trick of the fog. . . . Arriving at cross-roads, she made to cross the street, but halted suddenly as the headlights of a car, slowly driven, came upon her suddenly. She stepped back on to the curb.

As she did so, a vague form moved swiftly towards her. Ere she realised her danger, an arm went out and encircled her neck, and a hand was clapped over her mouth. She fought with the ferocity of a young tigress, but the man who held her tightened his arm round her neck until she was partly suffocated. A low whistle brought the car to a standstill.

“Got her?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure she’s the right——?”

“Open that door—quick!”

A hoist, and Ann was projected inside the closed vehicle. The blinds were down, and the car was moving at a greater speed than the conditions warranted. Ann gasped for breath, and then made a wild spring for the door. But two arms caught her, and she was pushed brutally into the corner of the capacious seat.

"Shut your mouth if you don't want to get hurt," said a voice from the darkness.

The car moved on through a deserted, gloomy world.

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME

#### IX

LEEKs and Rogers paid Blackham a visit after the closing of the public-houses, with a view to playing a game of cards, and Blackham welcomed them none too warmly, for he preferred to sit and read a book on philosophy. He had a fine taste in literary matters, and nothing in common with the two men save a desire to obtain money by easy means.

"Hell of a night," said Leeks. "Where's Ann?"

"Working late."

"Still at that old job?"

"Yes."

"How did she get it—with no experience?"

"Mind your own business," snapped Blackham.

"Why shouldn't Ann get a decent job?"

"No offence meant," mumbled Leeks. "But a girl usually has to provide references."



“ Well ? ”

“ Oh, nothing. Get out some cards.”

They played an old “ swindle ” which involved a small element of skill, and Blackham was much too good for them. He collected their sixpences and shillings with consummate ease, while they frowned and cursed their luck, but they took it out in whiskey.

“ I had a visitor a few days ago,” said Blackham suddenly.

“ Oh ! Who ? ”

“ Anton.”

Two pairs of eyes were instantly turned on him. That name induced unmistakable alarm.

“ The Tiger ! ”

“ The devil ! ” growled Blackham. “ It’s years since I met him face to face.”

“ What—what did he want ? ” enquired Rogers.

“ He had a proposal—which I turned down.”

“ What kind ? ”

“ It doesn’t matter. But how did he know I was living here ? Have either of you two been opening your mouths too wide ? ”

“ Not likely,” said Leeks. “ But why did you turn him down ? He’s clever—can pull off anything.”

“ We have other eggs to fry.”

“ You mean—the Reckoner ? But he’s lying doggo. We haven’t seen him for weeks. Maybe we won’t see him no more.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ The Tiger’s after him. That means ”—he

drew his finger across his throat—"in the long run. You ought to have listened to what he had to say—so you ought."

Blackham flung his cards down savagely. At heart he had a fine contempt for the unsophisticated pair before him.

"I'll do as I think fit," he said. "If you don't like it, you can go your own way. You know Anton. Would he give you the sort of deal that the Reckoner does? You say he is clever; so he is; but he would sacrifice his best friend to save his own neck, and has done so many times. And he stops at nothing—a savage, cruel swine of a man, who engages in the lowest kind of schemes. You know nothing of men—nothing of anything. You are inclined to plump for the fellow who shouts loudest. I tell you that when Anton and the Reckoner really come to a fixed battle, Anton will be swept to oblivion. No, I'm not playing any more."

He looked up at the clock. It was midnight. Nervously he lighted his pipe. It was not good for Ann to be out so late. As usual, his mind swung to her—this girl of his for whom he had done so little, and was powerless to do much. He cursed himself for the life he led, but could see no way out of it. The telephone bell rang loudly.

"That may be Ann," he said, "held up by this infernal fog."

The two men watched him go into the hall. and

took an excellent opportunity to make yet another raid on the whiskey.

"Huffy to-night," said Leeks. "See here, if the Tiger is arter us, I feel like quitting."

Rogers shrugged his shoulders, having no opinion of his own. Blackham came back, with his mouth compressed. They stared at him a he sat down.

"Was it—Ann?"

"It was the Reckoner."

"Get out!"

"He is on his way here."

"Business?"

"Obviously. Do you think he comes for the sake of our company?"

"All right," snarled Leeks. "No need to dig us like that. Thank Gawd there's something in the wind. I'm pretty well broke."

Time passed, and Blackham grew very apprehensive about Ann. Even allowing for delay due to the fog, she was extraordinarily late. Then, while he paced the room, as if oblivious to the presence of his two accomplices, the front-door bell rang—thrice.

"Him!" said Leeks.

"You go, Rogers."

Rogers let in the late caller. The Reckoner passed by him and entered the room. The wonderful mask seemed less vapid than usual—alive with expression.

"Shut that door!"

Rogers closed the door that led into the passage,

and the Reckoner removed his black gloves, moved his fingers like a pianist about to execute a solo, and sat down.

"So I find you altogether—good! Our next *coup* is due—in fact, overdue. I have a portrait here of a gentleman of artistic renown—of apparently unblemished record. Oh, this world of whited sepulchres! For the good of his health we must look after him for a period. Take a look at him, Blackham."

A cutting from a newspaper was passed across to Blackham.

"Mr. Harry Reynolds. You want him?"

"Precisely. This man—but never mind the details. . . . I think this house is not quite the right place for him. I have chosen another sanctuary. The affair must take place to-morrow night. You will meet me——"

The telephone bell rang again. The Reckoner bade Leeks go and answer it. He continued to give his instructions, but, before he had finished, Leeks returned with his rat-like eyes agog.

"The—the Tiger!" he stammered.

"Well?"

"He—he wants to speak to you, Blackham."

The Reckoner looked at Blackham intently.

"So you have business relations with dear Anton?"

"No. I loathe him. He came here and—I had better go and see what he wants."



“Go, then, but have a care.”

The Reckoner sat blowing perfect rings of smoke one through another, to the admiration of his small audience. He was still occupied in this innocent relaxation when Blackham reappeared. The master of the house stood framed in the doorway, with an ugly look in his eyes.

“Close the door,” said the Reckoner. “This *ménage* of yours is as draughty as a railway station and——”

Blackham advanced on him, head forward—aggressively. The Reckoner sat quite still, pouting a little at these very unusual signs of fierce animosity.

“Unpleasant news, apparently?” he said.

“Do you know what he said?” grated Blackham harshly.

“My ears are keen, but not quite so keen as that. Perhaps you will be good enough to explain?”

“It was—about Ann.”

“I am still in the dark. What has Ann got to do with Anton?”

“You mean—you don’t know—about Ann?”

“You speak in riddles.”

Blackham’s anger overcame his natural discretion. He caught the Reckoner by the coat with his strong left hand and glared into the painted face.

“It’s true. You have been playing with me. It was Ann you were after. That’s why you got her that job. What have you done with her? Answer, or by G——!”

A hand descended on his wrist—a hand that was delicately shaped but as powerful as a piece of machinery. The Reckoner stood up suddenly and threw Blackham off as if he were a child. The frenzied man flew to a bureau and whipped out a pistol, but when he turned the Reckoner had a pistol too—and it was levelled and very steady.

“A very unconvincing sort of argument—this,” he said. “But it seems that you appreciate no other. Stand exactly as you are for a moment. Good! Since when has Ann been missing?”

“You—you ask me that?”

“Answer, if you want to see her again.”

“To—to-night. She was working late. I was waiting for her when—when Anton told me that you——”

“Strange how you believe every dirty lie that Anton breathes! It looks as if I shall have to pay him a visit.”

Blackham’s mind was beginning to work a little more logically. He recalled the Tiger’s visit, his evil suggestion, and now——

“It—it was he, then,” he muttered, “trying to score——?”

“Yes, the old stupid business that you swallow so easily. You may put the pistol away—a dangerous toy in the hands of a man so impulsive and irrational.”

Blackham looked embarrassed, and threw the pistol into a drawer. The Reckoner pocketed his own weapon, and casually drew on his gloves.

"I'm coming with you," said Blackham. "If anything should happen to Ann——"

"You will stay here."

"No."

"Oh, yes. Tiger-hunting is a hazardous business, requiring skill and cunning—and a knowledge of the jungle in which the beast moves. I happen to possess that knowledge. Good night! The other little business is deferred. This is a matter that brooks no delay."

Blackham ran to him as he made for the door, but was ordered back. Bitterly disappointed, and pallid with apprehension, he almost fell into a chair.

"Ann—with that beast!" he groaned. "Get out, you two. Get out and leave me alone!"

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## X

ANTON DUBOIS—the Tiger—rubbed his hands gleefully, and gazed through the porthole of his cabin at the deep creek which ran like a dirty snake across the Essex flats. By the direction of the flow he knew that the tide had turned. Three miles out it was advancing across the flats, as relentlessly as Time itself. The mainland was a mile distant, desolate, treeless, and misty. Such an anchorage suited Dubois. At the lowest tide the big yawl still had enough water to keep her afloat, but she might have experienced difficulty in getting to sea, for in places the creek shallowed.

She was a seaworthy vessel, fitted with an auxiliary motor of considerable capacity. Dubois had picked her up at Toulon, and had twice put her across the Bay of Biscay. During the war she had carried a number in lieu of name, but now she was styled *Zita*. Her cabin accommodation was not inconsiderable, and Anton himself occupied quite a well-fitted apartment amidships. It was a curious room, filled with curious objects, from cases of butterflies to stuffed birds—for Anton was a bit of a naturalist when he was not on the track of money. He loved nothing better than to catch live things, pull them to pieces, or stuff them; and it afforded him endless delight to gaze at minute wriggling things under a powerful microscope.

He was a creature of moods, and could run the whole gamut of human emotions within an hour, from sardonic humour to horrible morbidity. Drink played havoc with him, and he would fight the craving for months on end, only to end up with a carousal that usually spelt trouble for someone. This afternoon he was in good humour, for things had gone much as he had planned them. Ann had been kidnapped on the preceding night, but the car which bore her was not able to make the coast until the fog lifted a little. On shore he had waited for a telephone message to the effect that his plan had succeeded, and immediately upon receiving it he had rung up Blackham, for the sheer joy of getting one back on him.



Ann had arrived a few hours ago, and was now a prisoner in a cabin which he had prepared for her. He meant the girl no harm. Women! He had no personal use for them. Now and again they served as pawns in his game, and this was one of the occasions. There were other women he might have used, without any opposition on their part, but such adventuresses as Anton was acquainted with had not Ann's freshness of countenance, her transparent purity of soul. And she was Blackham's daughter! That made matters comparatively simple—to his mind. He pushed a bell, and a bearded man of French extraction appeared.

"I am ready to see the girl," said Anton in French. "Bring her in here."

"Oui! Toute de suite!"

Five minutes passed, and then Ann was brought in. She was pallid and heavy-eyed from a sleepless night—a night of unimaginable horror and anxiety. When she saw Anton's bloodless, square face, she remembered him immediately. He was the man who had called on her father—a visit that had ended in a quarrel. Anton bowed, and offered her a chair.

"No?" he said, as she stood there rigid. "But it is better to rest. You look fatigued—exhausted."

"What—what do you want with me?" she asked. "Why—why have you brought me here?"

"That is exactly what I am about to explain. Come, you are trembling. That is ver' foolish. You and I have a little business to do, and then—

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then you shall be free to go where you choose, with a nice sum of money to buy yourself clothes. We are old friends, though you may not remember."

"I have only seen you once before in my life," she said, "and that was a very short time ago."

"You are wrong. It was in Paris—seven years ago. You were just a little girl then. But that is of no importance. Your excellent parent and I used to be friends—business confrères. But he, like a very foolish man, decided to part company with me, and as a result you have suffered."

Ann said nothing. The tense and rather sibilant voice terrified her. All this suavity, these gestures of friendliness, did not deceive her. She felt—she knew—that she was in the presence of a brute, a man of unknown depths. Her natural timidity caused her heart to thump painfully, but she fought a great fight against cowardice, and tried to keep a stiff lip.

"Why have you brought me here?" she reiterated.

"I am about to tell you. I desire to get certain information from a gentleman who lives in Paris. He is rather a stubborn individual, but has a very human weakness. He is susceptible to beauty—feminine beauty. You will be introduced into quite nice society as a young lady of good birth—and chaperoned. I will give you a name later. You will do exactly as you are told until—until I get what I want. I assure you it will be a simple matter. A kiss or two, a few subtle——"

Ann's eyes were opening wider and wider with horror. The Tiger went on, drawing pictures of high life in Paris, the good time she would have—clothes, money, anything.

“Stop!” she gasped. “You—you must be mad. I do not want to go to Paris. I will not masquerade as a common woman——”

“A common woman! My dear Ann! You shall have a title.”

“I know what you mean. Because my father has not been—all he should have been, you imagine that I—— You are hateful. You will gain nothing by this cruel abduction. Please—please let me go!”

“Don't be a silly little goose! I am not asking you to do anything terrible. You will be as well guarded as any woman could possibly be. For your services—if you succeed—I will make you a present of five hundred pounds. Isn't that better than waiting on a crowd of people in a small London restaurant? How long will it take you to save five hundred pounds at that sort of work?”

“Will you—will you put me ashore?”

“Oh, no. In five hours we shall be at sea. It is a pity you compel me to bring pressure to bear, but so it is.”

“I tell you nothing—nothing will induce me to do such a thing as you suggest. When—when we land I shall appeal to the authorities——”

The Tiger shook his head.

"You will not, for two good reasons. In the first place, you will see no authorities ; and in the second, I think you may change your mind."

"Never ! I have had a chance to get out of the rut in which I was placed. I mean—to go straight."

He laughed cynically.

"Wonderful ! Quite melodramatic ! A touch of the old man there ! He always meant to go straight, but found it did not pay." His expression changed suddenly. "No nonsense. You will do exactly as I say if you want to keep your devoted parent out of jail."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You do. He is in the pay of the Reckoner—a man who is wanted for murder."

Ann blanched at this.

"That isn't true," she gasped.

"Isn't it ? But we will let that go, and deal with proved facts. Seven years ago a warrant was issued by the French authorities for the arrest of Père Thomas, who was implicated in a certain affair in which a man lost his life. They lost Père—he vanished like a ghost. But they managed to secure finger-prints on a broken glass, and they corresponded with those of a man who had served a short sentence at Grenoble. His photograph was published in the French Press. Would you care to see it ?"

Without waiting for her reply, he opened a drawer and extracted an old French newspaper. Inset



was a portrait of Père Thomas. Ann stared at it in horror, for it was her father. Badly reproduced as it was, the thing was unmistakable.

"I think I am about the only man in the world who can put his hand on Père Thomas," said Anton. "Just a line to the Sûreté, and the issue of an order, and the long arm of the French police will fall—you know where. Am I to forward that information?"

Ann felt sick and faint. The room seemed to revolve around her. She grabbed at a table, and fell. The Tiger's eyes gleamed as he ran and caught her limp form.

"You must sleep," he said. "Oh, you need not fear. I am an excellent chaperon. Just think things over. I am sure you will not force my hand. I am loyal—up to a point."

He pushed the bell again.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XI

COMPLETE exhaustion laid its kindly hand upon Ann. She slept for over twelve hours, and awoke to find it still dark, and the boat pitching rather badly. The cabin she occupied was small, but quite comfortable, and a porthole afforded her an outlook to starboard. She could see nothing but a waste of tumbling sea, and a few stars overhead. Towards the east there was a faint luminosity, and she concluded it must be near dawn.

Full consciousness now flooded in, and her heart became torn with dread and doubt. How to act in the circumstances she did not know. Appalled as she was at the Tiger's suggestion, the alternative was scarcely less painful. Duty, loyalty, where did they begin and end? She was judge enough of character to feel assured that a categorical refusal to have anything to do with her captor's vile scheme would result in his carrying out his threat.

Her head throbbed under the crushing burden of her problem. But for the threat to her father her position would not have been so bad, for there must come an opportunity when she could divulge the plot and secure assistance. But now she was wedged into a cleft stick.

A reluctant dawn broke at last. A knock on the door, and a man entered with some hot water. He could not speak English, but apparently he was aware that she could speak French, for he addressed her in that language.

"Breakfast will be served in the captain's cabin in half an hour, mademoiselle."

So he expected her to eat with him! Her very soul revolted, but a little reflection convinced her that nothing was to be gained by recalcitrance. Better to play for time, until an inspiration could come, though she could imagine no possible way out. Later she left her cabin and found Anton's. She knocked, and was invited in. The table was laid for two, and laid quite well: some old silver, a

damask tablecloth, and good china and cutlery. Anton turned his deep-set eyes on her.

"You are looking better. That is well. Coffee or tea?"

"Coffee," she faltered.

"Quite appropriate, for we are nearing France. French coffee and English eggs and bacon. Quite a nice compromise."

She ate sparingly, for she was feeling far from well. Moreover, his eyes were on her the whole time.

"I hope you have been thinking over what I said last night?"

"Yes."

"And you see the wisdom of falling in with my plans, eh?"

"I—I don't know. You have not made it quite clear. What do you expect me to do?"

"A certain gentleman will be attracted by you—oh, yes, I can promise that. You will merely encourage him. You are old enough to know how to do that—with a certain amount of reserve. He is not like me—I do not care for women. I would rather keep stuffed birds. Oh, no, our friend has no armour against a woman's eyes, lips, sighs. He will suggest *tête-à-tête* in plenty, and you will humour him. He has in his apartment certain documents. Later I will tell you where they are hid."

"You—you expect me to steal them?"

"No. That is not necessary—in fact, it would

be a great blunder, for their value would immediately fall. It is only necessary for you to peruse them. They are in French, and a fair memory should enable you to carry away the context. When that is achieved you will vanish, and he will see you no more. That is all you need do to win five hundred pounds. There are thousands of girls who would jump at such a chance."

"Then why select me?"

"Because—because you have just those physical attributes essential to success. I make it a point to analyse my—victims. He wouldn't look at a blonde, or a brazen-faced woman of doubtful reputation. But brown eyes that are soft, a trifle wistful; a natural timidity—ah, there he falls. Isn't it simple?"

Ann breathed heavily, but managed to retain a firm grip on her emotions.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I don't think I could succeed. I have never had any experience——"

"That is your strength. I will lend you the experience. It will be easy. Trust me."

On leaving him, she went on deck, and felt better in the open air. The ship's course was not a regular one, and scarcely another vessel was seen, for visibility was not too good. That night the French coast was sighted, and the yawl anchored a mile from the shore. When darkness fell, a boat was lowered and Ann was told to be ready to disembark.



She and the Tiger put off in the small boat, and were soon standing on the dunes. He took her arm and led her through the darkness. In a few minutes they came upon a closed car, with its lights doused. The Tiger helped Ann inside.

“Paris !”

It was after midnight when the car passed through the gates of the gay city and entered a long boulevard. At the end of it the vehicle stopped, and the Tiger stepped out and beckoned to Ann. Close by him was a gendarme. For one moment Ann thought of rushing to the officer, but quickly she saw the madness of such a step.

“Ah,” said the Tiger, “I am glad you are rational—at last. My sister lives here. You will find her most affectionate.”

A lift conveyed them to the top floor of a tall building. Outside a door on the left of the corridor was the name of the occupant—Madame Claire Norland. The Tiger pushed the bell, and a maid answered it.

“Madame expects me,” said the Tiger, and walked straight in. “Please tell her that Anton is here.”

Ann found herself in a beautifully appointed flat. The room in which she now waited was evidently the lounge. The carpet was thick and silky, and scattered about were deep chairs and settees. Everywhere was manifest good taste and wealth. Then came madame—a buxom woman of about

fifty, clad in a brilliant kimono. The Tiger kissed her on both cheeks.

"Here is my little friend, Ann," he said. "You will take great care of her. At the moment she is very tired."

"Ma chérie!" cooed madame. "It is a long way from England. But your room is ready, and maybe you are too tired to talk to-night. Tomorrow I will show you Paris. Come!"

Ann, bewildered and dog-tired, followed her escort into a charming bedroom. There was a big wardrobe near the window, and madame opened it to display an immense array of gowns, hats, shoes, everything that a woman could desire.

"You will find something to fit you there," she said. "Sleep well, my dear."

But, when she left, the door snapped, and Ann quickly discovered it was locked. She went to the window and gazed out. It looked over a thousand roofs, and below was a terrible abyss. Immediately opposite was an expansive flat roof, but it was too far away to be reached by any means she could think of. In any case, escape was inadvisable. Leaving the window slightly ajar, she went to bed, clad in an expensive silk nightie which she selected from the wardrobe. For hours she did not sleep, for she imagined she heard queer noises from without. But she was too scared to investigate, and at last lost consciousness.

At ten o'clock the next morning the Tiger called on his "sister." He was clad *d' la mode*—morning coat, light trousers, and grey spats, with a top hat that was beyond reproach. On this occasion he did not kiss madame, but addressed her as an underling.

"The girl—is she up?"

"Not yet. I had a peep at her. She was still sleeping, so I did not awaken her."

"But it is nearly mid-day, and I have friends to whom I wish to introduce you both. Go, tell her I am waiting."

Madame nodded, and walked to the door of the prisoner's room. She slipped back the catch, and saw the huddled form on the bed.

"Mademoiselle!"

There was no response, so she went closer.

"Mademoiselle!"

A startled cry left her lips as she turned back the eiderdown. The huddled form was a bolster, covered with a silk nightdress.

"Anton!"

The Tiger came running in. A curse left his lips as he saw the dummy, but what caused a fouler torrent of invective was a note pinned to the bolster. It bore the drawing of a pair of scales in red crayon.

"The Reckoner!" he almost screamed.

ANN was scarcely aware of what had happened on that memorable night. She had awakened with a start, to find the lights turned on and a figure between her and the door. Ere she could scream in her terror the figure turned, and she saw the familiar mask of the Reckoner. Immediately he had taken control, waiting in the bathroom while she changed into her own dress. Then he had picked the lock of the door, fashioned the dummy deftly, and attached the note.

Dumbfounded, she had been led along the corridor, through the lounge, and out by the main door. Followed a swift ride through Paris to a field on the outskirts, and now—now, in the grey morning light—she was being whirled through space, with mother earth five thousand feet below. Yonder was the sea, like an inverted bowl.

Beside her sat the Reckoner, almost completely enveloped in a greatcoat. They were in a passenger aeroplane, and the invisible pilot was killing space at enormous speed. So quick had the changes been rung that she had overlooked one important fact—the Tiger, in his baffled rage, might carry out his threat.

“ Well, Ann, quick work this ? ”

“ I—I feel dazed. How did you know where I was ? ”

"A knowledge of the Tiger's movements are rather necessary to me."

"The Tiger!"

"Our friend Anton. He has won that *nom de guerre*. I arrived too late to prevent your leaving England, but I guessed his objective. Madame Claire is quite an old accomplice of his."

"But how did you get in?"

"Up the drain-pipe. Filthily dirty it was, too."  
Her eyes filled with amazement.

"You—you have been extremely kind to me, but I fear that it is not for the best. That man—he has my poor father in his power. He had proofs—oh, how can I explain?"

"There is no need. Your father has been a little—indiscreet. I quite expected the Tiger would use that lever."

"But if he should go at once to the police, they may get into touch with Scotland Yard, and then——"

The Reckoner laughed softly.

"I telephoned your father last night. By this time he is far away from that house. I can't afford to let him be arrested."

"You can't afford——!"

Ann pondered long over this phrase. It made matters painfully clear. Her father had merely slipped out of the Tiger's hands into the Reckoner's. That thought tortured her. The Reckoner was poles removed from the Tiger, but the



difference was temperamental. Both were engaged in felonious pursuits.

"Why is my father necessary to you?" she asked. "I want to be grateful for all you have done, but you encourage my father in this life of—dishonesty. Won't you—won't you let him go?"

"Where would he go?" he asked quietly. "He might exchange one employer for a worse—the Tiger, for instance. And perhaps you exaggerate the infamy of his exploits."

"I know nothing—except that money comes to him from strange sources. If he could only start afresh—if he could only get a real chance to go straight."

"Is that your fondest wish?"

"Yes."

A strange expression passed across the delicate mask. It was difficult to say whether it was amusement or sympathy. But his next words surprised her.

"He shall have that chance."

"You—you mean that? Oh, but it is impossible. Behind him is the past—a terrible record. Even now he has had to flee to escape the police."

"The world is a big place. Cheer up, Ann. Never let it be said that for some there are no opportunities at all. We will look into the matter."

"You are not mocking me?" she asked seriously.

"You are one of the few persons I would not mock."

"Why?"—naïvely.

"Because—fate has not dealt kindly with you. You sympathise with your father, but how much greater is your own need of sympathy! This is a world of wrong values, Ann—of defective justice. We have our laws, but only the fools are caught. The clever ones slip through the big meshes."

"And you?" she asked boldly.

"I?"

"Are you not in need of sympathy?"

He turned his head away, as if he preferred not to face her deep, moist eyes.

"I wish I could understand," she said.

"What do you wish to understand?"

He was facing her now, and her hand was completely enclosed in his.

"You," she stammered. "That mask—the things you do. They say—I have heard—things I dare not believe."

"Then why believe them?"

"I don't—I can't. It isn't in keeping with your—your kindness to me. There was some one hidden in our house. He was brought there months ago—then he went. My father tried to hide that from me. But I knew—I was terrified. And you came at times. Don't you see—how difficult it is not to believe—horrid things?"

"Must you trouble your mind with them?"

"Yes. I can't help myself."

"Then you must. I tell you, Ann, that the police would go to a great deal of trouble to have me safely lodged in jail, and it is my fixed intention to stay out of jail. But that doesn't imply that what I do is beyond pardon, nor that I am even ashamed of myself. Look! Isn't that a wonderful aspect?"

It was like a hint to discontinue that intimate conversation. The coast of England was in sight, and the great plane swept forward. Ultimately it passed over English soil, and made a landing on a deserted common. The passengers got out, and almost immediately the machine went off again. Near by was a wooden bungalow, half hidden among trees. The Reckoner hurried towards it. At the door he stopped.

"Here we part, Ann. There is a railway station within two miles—that way. You cannot possibly miss it. At this address you will find your father—presuming he has had the good sense to heed my warning."

He gave her a card, with an address on it.

"You have money?"

"Yes."

"Tell your father I will see him in two days' time."

"But our house—am I not to go back there?"

"It would be inadvisable at the moment. Later I will tell you what to do. You may tell Kettering you were unwell. He will ask no further questions. Good-bye!"

A handshake and he was gone. Ann gazed at the closed door for a moment, and then started off for the railway station. Within two hours she was in London, and twenty minutes later at the address which the Reckoner had given her. It was a small house off Maida Vale, and Tim Bright opened the door.

"Miss Ann!" he gasped. "Your father is worrying his life out. Wot you bin doing?"

"Is he in?"

"Yes. He ain't well."

Ann hurried in, and found Blackham in bed, looking exceedingly blue, but his eye lighted up when he saw her.

"Father!"

"Ann! What happened? Tell me everything."

She told him briefly what had transpired, and a look of hate passed over his face when the Tiger was mentioned.

"The swine!" he growled. "He holds that over me, Ann. I had no hand in that business—at least, not in the death of that man. But the Tiger was cunning enough to make me look like the guilty man. And I shouldn't stand an earthly chance in a French court. So—the Reckoner found you?"

"Yes—when everything seemed hopeless. Whose house is this? How did you get it?"

"The Reckoner arranged that. He told me to come here—and where to find the key. It isn't safe to go back to the other place—until we are certain that the Tiger has not squealed."

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"But all my things are there—and there's the furniture!"

"I know—I know. But the Reckoner will fix it all. You say he is coming to see me?"

"In two days' time."

"Where is this bungalow of his?"

"I don't know the name of the place."

"But it is near a railway station."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I—father, I don't think I ought to tell anyone. He had to rely upon my—my good faith."

"But your own father! Why, I am indebted to him."

"Yes—yes, but that gives me no right to betray a confidence. Please—please don't ask me."

Blackham growled at this. But Ann had a will of her own, and he knew it would be useless to try to force her hand.

"I am to go back to Kettering's," she said.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"If the Tiger lodges information, you will be shadowed, and my freedom wouldn't be worth twopence. The Reckoner must be mad to advise you to do that."

"But I must keep my job."

Blackham couldn't see the need. His pride was still operating. This seemed to him an excellent chance of getting Ann back into the house. But



Ann had not the slightest intention of throwing up her job. She decided to stay at a small hotel for the next two or three nights—until the problem could be solved by the fertile brain of the Reckoner.

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*THE SPLENDID CRIME**XIII*

IN the meantime, the threat to Harry Reynolds had not materialised, as Inspector Brent seemed to expect. Reynolds did not appear to let the matter worry him. On most days he could be found working in his studio. But now and again he noticed a man loitering in the neighbourhood, and concluded that Brent was on the alert.

Rose Harmer was living on the edge of a volcano. At any moment she expected to hear that Reynolds was murdered or had disappeared, and on Brent's theory her father's turn would be one step the nearer. One evening she met Brent, and found him in a state of mind which she recognised as suppressed excitement.

"You are withholding something of interest," she said.

"Withholding! Is that the word?"

"Am I not worthy of your confidence?"

"You certainly have amazing perception. As a matter of fact, a rather interesting development has taken place. The French police have long been wanting a man called Thomas. An anonymous informant has been in communication with the

Sûreté, and asserts that this man who fled from France some years ago is living in a house near Wapping under the name of Blackham. He added that Blackham is a confederate of the Reckoner."

"Have you made enquiries?"

"Yes. The allegation is—or was—true. But Blackham must have been warned, for the house was empty."

"Then it gets you no further?"

"It will, for we happen to know that Blackham has a daughter at the moment employed at Kettering's restaurant. She has been watched, in the hope that she might lead us to her father, but the girl is clever. She is staying at an hotel."

"Kettering's? I have been there. What kind of girl is she?"

"Young—and pretty. Conveys the impression of being an innocent little miss, but there is little doubt she is scouting for her father. So far we have not interrogated her."

"You think she is mixed up with the Reckoner?"

"There is every possibility of it."

Rose was quick to impart this information to Reynolds, chiefly because she knew he was in the habit of taking an occasional meal at Kettering's.

"There was a new girl—recently," he mused. "What do they call her? Ann—yes, Ann. But I'll swear she is straight."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, she looks it. Kettering told me she was

the most popular girl he had. Brent isn't going to start worrying her, is he ? ”

“ But if she is the daughter of a criminal—— ? ”

“ That doesn't prevent her from being honest. Consider yourself in her place—chivvied by the police just because some unknown person has made allegations. One oughtn't to take any notice of anonymous letters.”

“ Harry, you really are tiresome. Malcolm says that the information given is correct. The description given by tradesmen agrees exactly with the details in the possession of the French police. An extradition order has been signed. The man fled, and the girl goes to live at an hotel. Obviously she knows that her father is guilty.”

“ But that doesn't make her guilty.”

“ It does—guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. But Malcolm will make her talk.”

“ Brent is inclined to exceed his authority. If the girl has any intelligence—and she looks as though she had—she will refuse to say a word.”

Rose bridled at this. She was on the side of the law all the time, and she considered Reynolds's sympathy entirely misplaced.

“ You are perfectly amazing,” she said. “ This—this scoundrel—the Reckoner sends you a threat, and you are foolish enough to side with a girl who is proved to be in league with him.”

“ Is she ? I didn't know. Lord, Rose, how you women hate each other ! ”

"Harry! That isn't true. But I'm not going to let a lot of foolish sentiment warp my sense of justice. I have not yet forgotten that Sir Henry Lush was shot in the back, and if this girl——"

Reynolds winced, and lighted a cigarette. It was obvious to him that his indiscretion in attempting to shield the sad-eyed little Ann was having a bad effect upon Rose. He wished he had simulated complete ignorance of Blackham's distractingly beautiful daughter.

"How is the music going?" he enquired.

"Music! I have no heart to play in the midst of all this trouble."

"I don't see why not. I still find time to paint."

"You live in a dream, Harry, far away from realities. I—I wish I could awaken you."

"Some dreams are pleasant enough," he replied. "And why should I worry about things which do not greatly concern me?"

"Does not a threat to your life greatly concern you?"

"Not until something happens. Brent has been thoughtful enough to put a plain-clothes man on duty outside. So the Reckoner will experience some little difficulty in getting me—if that was really his intention, which I doubt."

"Why should you doubt—after what happened to Sir Henry?"

"Because I am comparatively harmless. Sir Henry wasn't."

"You can speak like that after——?"

"Why should we burke the truth? You know, Rose, that Sir Henry at the best was a grasping profiteer. He floated a hundred dud companies, fattened himself on credulous investors. You remember that accident in which he was involved. It was a poor little boy, and there is no doubt in my mind that Lush was absolutely at fault. He fought the case as if his very life was at stake, and won, with the aid of bribed witnesses. You ask me to weep tears for him."

Rose was rendered speechless. She had looked upon Sir Henry with an admiration bordering upon veneration. She liked men who made big money—men who fought on a grand scale.

"I—I am most annoyed with you," she said at last. "I can only assume that that girl attracts you."

"Well, she is not unattractive," he confessed.

On the following day Brent decided to force matters a little. He went to Kettering's early in the morning, and introduced himself as a police officer. Kettering opened his eyes wide.

"What have I done?"

"Nothing. My business concerns a girl in your employ—name, Ann Blackham."

"Yes—a very good girl."

"How long has she been employed here?"

"Only a few weeks."

"You had references?"



"Yes—well, no."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was an act of gratitude on my part. During the latter part of the war I got into trouble. It wasn't all my fault, and a man who apparently witnessed the affair got me out of it. I never saw him, never knew his name, but I sent a letter, hoping it would reach him, expressing my gratitude, and praying that one day I might be enabled to do him a good turn. Some weeks ago I received a letter—unsigned. It merely enclosed my own letter, and told me that I could discharge my obligation by giving a job to a girl who would call on me. There would be no references, and I was to ask no questions. That girl was Ann Blackham. She is a good girl, and I have never regretted my action."

"You have never seen her father?"

"No."

"Has she ever mentioned her father to you?"

"Never."

"Hm! I should like to see her when she arrives."

"What has she done?"

"Nothing. It is her father in whom I am interested."

When Ann arrived, Kettering told her that a man wished to speak to her in his office. She went there, and came face to face with Brent.

"You are Ann Blackham?"

"Yes."

"I am a police officer."

Ann went a trifle pale, but she was not taken entirely unaware. The Reckoner had bargained on this.

"Well?" she said. "What have I done?"

"Nothing. I merely want to ask you a few questions about your father."

"I am not answering any questions about my father."

"But this is a serious matter."

"I know nothing about that."

"When did you see your father——?"

"I have nothing to say, and I am very busy."

Brent bit his lip in vexation. It was not often that he met with such flat opposition.

"You have been advised to adopt this attitude?"

"Wouldn't that be in order?"

"Suppose I take you along with me?"

"Can you?"

"I may."

Ann smiled.

"I don't think you will."

"The Reckoner told you that."

"Who?"

"Your father's intimate friend."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Ann. "But you are wasting a lot of my time."

"I warn you that you are acting very indiscreetly."

"In refusing to meddle in other people's affairs?"

"No. In attempting to shield a criminal."

To this Ann made no response, and ultimately

Brent left the place, in a bad humour. He had imagined that the mere mention of Scotland Yard would have scared Ann into betraying the secret of her father's whereabouts. Obviously she had expected him, and had been well primed.

Ann now knew that any attempt to visit, or meet, her father would be fraught with danger. She was perfectly aware that she was being closely watched, and the experience was not nice. A few days later an unfortunate incident occurred—a customer lost a valuable cigarette-case. Apparently it vanished from his table while he was called to answer the telephone. It was the first time anything like that had happened at Kettering's place, and Kettering was sorely troubled.

On the following morning came an anonymous letter. It informed Kettering that the girl called Ann was the daughter of a crook, and that the writer had the means of knowing that she had been discharged from a former situation on suspicion of having stolen sundry articles. Kettering made a few enquiries as to Ann's movements, and discovered that she was living in an hotel the cost of which was obviously beyond her means. Then there was that business with the police inspector! Kettering, with his reputation at stake, took the only means open to him.

"I'm afraid I shall have to dispense with your services at the end of the week," he said.

Ann started violently.

"Aren't I—satisfactory?" she quavered.

"Quite—quite; but I—I have had to make new arrangements regarding the staff."

Ann asked no more questions. To her the matter was clear enough. She could not blame Kettering. The police were queering her pitch, she imagined. But her heart was heavy with bitter disappointment. She could not—dared not—go to live with her father, nor could she afford to retain her present room at the hotel. Her one great chance was shattered!

Reynolds came to the restaurant on the night before she was due to leave. Her sad eyes divulged her sorrow. He enquired if she were unwell, and she averred she was not.

"Worried?" he enquired. "Too long hours in this stuffy place. You need a holiday."

"I am getting one—next week," she replied.

"Good! I hope you will come back looking brighter."

"Thank you! But—I am not coming back."

"You—you have taken another post?"

She shook her head.

"Mr. Kettering is making—certain changes," she said.

"And you will be out of a berth?"

"Yes."

"Will it be difficult to get another?"

"I am—afraid so."

"Would you like me to speak to Kettering?"

"No—please don't," she begged. "I couldn't stay here now—not after——"

She left him abruptly, with tears in her eyes. Later he saw Kettering.

"So you are getting rid of Ann?" he said.

"Well—yes."

"Why?"

Kettering bridled at this.

"I have my reasons."

"Your reasons are muddle-headed. In future I will get my meals elsewhere."

Kettering gazed after him and then shrugged his shoulders. He had lost a good customer, but his duty appeared to be plain. That night he added two pounds to the salary due to Ann, and was quite taken aback when she thanked him—and returned the two notes.

"I only want what I earn—honestly, Mr. Kettering."

He wondered if, after all, he had not acted imprudently.

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME

#### XIV

BLACKHAM paced up and down the sitting-room of his new abode, ears alert for the slightest unusual sound. His nerves were on edge, and he had been drinking heavily. Although his own movements were unrestricted, any meeting with Ann was impossible. The Tiger had taken a fine revenge



—robbed him of the company of his own daughter. Daily she rang him up to comfort him, and every time he was told that the police were on the watch.

“Can’t I meet you somewhere?” he begged. “It can be late at night and——”

But Ann cut him short.

“Wherever it was, and at whatever time, we should be caught. It wouldn’t do, daddy.”

“I can’t go on living here alone—not a soul to talk to. Even the Reckoner does not come.”

“You must be patient. When you see him, tell him—everything. Perhaps he will find a way to bring us together.”

She made light of her present invidious position, told him that she was hoping to get a job before her funds gave out. He suggested posting her some money, but she declined it, and caused him to wince.

But on this evening the Reckoner did come. Tim Bright entered, with nervous eyes, and pointed outside. Before he could find speech, the Reckoner strolled into the room, looked at Tim, and made a quick gesture. Tim vanished immediately. It was his first sight of that strange mask, and he was a creature of rich imagination.

“Who is that?” demanded the Reckoner.

“Servant. I had to employ someone when Ann left me. Women talk too much.”

“He is safe?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hm! So you adopted my suggestion?”

"Of course. Ann told me about what happened. I'm sorry I was misled at first—about you. If ever I see Anton again, I'll——"

"Oh, no, you can safely leave Anton to me. I presume you have not seen Ann since she left her job?"

"No. Those damned policemen have put a watch on her. Brent went to Kettering's and tried to extort a statement from her. She told me she took your advice and refused to say a word. Then he took a mean revenge, and got her sacked."

The Reckoner shook his head as he calmly lighted a cigarette. Blackham continued to pour out his woe, his detestation of the Tiger and of Brent.

"Have you finished?" enquired the Reckoner blandly.

"Finished——!"

"Why not look nearer home for the cause of all this misery? You might have gone straight."

"You—you say that! Well, I'm——!"

"I agree that Anton is an unmitigated scoundrel, who would sink to anything in order to score off you—or me. But Inspector Brent has some small sense of decency, although he takes his profession a little too seriously. It was not he who opened Kettering's eyes as to the social standing of her devoted parent. It was friend Anton, who loathes to be outwitted. That, of course, was inevitable, when all else failed."

"The—the rat!"

"So you wish to see Ann?"

"Of course. She's the only thing I care two pins about. What's to become of her—chivvied about by the police? She has practically no money, and refuses to accept any from me."

"Naturally."

Blackham glared, but the Reckoner remained quite impassive.

"I telephoned Ann just now," he said. "She desires to see you, so I have arranged a meeting."

"How? She cannot come here, and I dare not go there, with my photograph in the possession of the police. They probably suspect I may pay her a visit."

"Yes—they do. But I think you may risk it. It is a comparatively simple matter. Strangely enough, it is the simplest plans that usually succeed. Ann will leave the hotel punctually at eight o'clock. The police officer will follow her. At five minutes past eight you will enter the hotel and wait for her. She will return at a quarter past eight. When you have said your say, Ann will emerge again. Our leech-like detective will still persist in following her. Give her five minutes to get clear, and then——"

"By Jove, yes! It's strange I didn't think of that. But the future—are we to go on like this indefinitely?"

"Why trouble about the future? Wise men

never do. Be satisfied with the present, for soon you may have to say good-bye to Ann—for ever.”

Blackham gave a great start, and gripped the arm of his chair, his eyes blazing.

“What’s that?” he demanded.

“You are the incubus—the obstacle in her way. There is no sort of life for her—no real happiness—while you stand in the way. If you love her you won’t stand in her way.”

“What—what do you expect me to do?”

“When the time is ripe I will make suitable arrangements—for you and her. Go now and keep your appointment. Remember not to arrive at the hotel until five minutes past the hour. I will make myself comfortable here and do a little writing.”

The Reckoner’s plan worked quite well. Brent’s assistant carried out his instructions to the letter. Ann was cleverly shadowed to several shops, where she made a few small purchases, and then back to the hotel. She found her father sitting in a dark corner.

“So—so you came!”

“Yes. Were you—followed?”

“I am always followed. They think that one day I shall lead them—— But you look ill.”

“I am worried—about the future—about you. What are you to do with no home—no job——?”

“Wait. I have had some good news. At least it—it sounds promising. It came after I telephoned

you, and I have been wanting to see you. A man—a gentleman who used to dine at Kettering's—has offered me a job."

"What sort of a job?" he growled.

"Amanuensis. He is an artist really, but he is now writing a book——"

"But you are inexperienced."

Ann blushed a shade.

"Not—not quite," she said. "Look at my new toy—or, at least, the results of it."

She produced some folded sheets from her pocket. They were typewritten, and quite well done—copies of leading articles from *The Times* and other newspapers.

"But how——?"

"When I left Kettering's I realised that my qualifications for anything were so—so few. There is a nice girl here in the office, and she is not very busy in the evenings. She—she helped me, and even lent me an old typewriter, which was not in use. I took it to my room, and I've been practising—practising eight hours a day. Then, as if by some miracle, this offer came. There is no need for shorthand, as Mr. Reynolds speaks very slowly, and sometimes prefers to write his material first——"

"Reynolds! Is that his name?"

"Yes. Mr. Harry Reynolds. He lives in Chelsea, and——"

Blackham gulped. Of all the marvellous coincidences, this was the most remarkable.



"You can't go there," he said firmly.

"But why not? I have told Mr. Reynolds that I am new to the work, and he was most generous. Every evening I am free after five, and the salary is sufficient to enable me to find a nice lodging. This, of course, was only temporary. I should try to find a room near his studio in——"

"No."

She seemed to resent the flat negative.

"Don't you want me to earn my own living?"

"Ann, there are reasons. Don't ask me now. You must write to him and tell him that you cannot accept his offer."

"You think—he is not a gentleman?"

"He may be. That is not the point at all."

"Then what is the point?"

He dared not tell her that the Reckoner had marked down Reynolds, that but for her exploit with the Tiger this man who now offered to employ her might be suffering—— They wrangled, and failed to agree. At the parting moment he ordered her to do as he told her, but Ann gave him no definite promise. It seemed to her that the time had come when she must use her own judgment, and she believed that Reynolds was straight and decent. Moreover, the work he offered appealed to her.

Blackham reached home safely, and found the Reckoner stretched on the sofa smoking. He did not turn his head when Blackham entered, but

carried on with his clever ring-blowing. Blackham flung off his coat and dumped himself into a chair.

"Did all go well?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Then your mind is relieved?"

"No. Did Ann tell you anything about a job that was offered her?"

"Not a word."

"Well, she's crazy to go as amanuensis to an artist who is writing a book—a customer she used to serve at Kettering's. And who do you think he turns out to be?"

"I couldn't guess."

"Reynolds—Harry Reynolds—our next job."

The Reckoner's eyes contracted, and he flung the end of his cigarette into the fire.

"Curious—that," he mused. "What did you say?"

"I forbade her to have anything to do with him."

"On what grounds?"

"Grounds! Good God, isn't it obvious? If Reynolds is missing, and Ann is discovered to be in his employ, do you think Brent is likely to overlook the apparent coincidence? Ann would be implicated. They would have a fine excuse to take her."

"Hm! I suppose that is quite possible."

"Possible! It's a certainty."

"In that case we will strike Reynolds off the list—for the time being—if Ann is so keen on this job."

"What!" gasped Blackham.

"My dear Blackham, time is not so pressing as all that. Any other objections?"

"Yes. I know nothing of that fellow. Looks to me as if he is just an admirer, and that the offer is a put-up business. Why should he want Ann when he can get a hundred experienced girls to do the work much better?"

"He may desire a congenial atmosphere. I think we will give him a chance. Better ring up Ann and tell her that, after careful consideration, you waive your former objection."

"I'm damned if I do!"

"You may be damned if you don't," retorted the Reckoner. "What is the alternative to Ann taking a job?"

Blackham clenched his fists impotently. He was cornered—a wanted man. He cursed the Tiger, the police, himself, and the world at large. Why should Ann suffer—why—why?

"Cause and effect," mused the Reckoner. "You supply the cause and Ann reaps the effects. But Ann is going to have a straight run now. Get on the telephone, and stop cursing."

"If he is a white man, why did you want him?" snarled Blackham.

"That is my concern. Well, I will impart the good news myself."

He picked up the telephone and called Ann. Thirty seconds later her voice was heard.

"Ah, Ann," he said. "You know who is speaking? Good! Your father and I have been considering the Reynolds offer, and we find ourselves in accord. You must accept it—yes, accept it. The best of luck to you. Cheerio!"

"Wait!" cried Blackham.

"Too late! Consider her rate of progress. Waitress to amanuensis in a few brief weeks. One cannot say where she will finish up at this rate. You should be proud of your daughter, Blackham."

Blackham scowled at the mocking tones. There were times when he thought he hated the Reckoner, and this was one of them. Everything seemed to be slipping out of his grasp. Even his own daughter was receding—receding.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XV

HARRY REYNOLDS sat in a deep and luxurious chair, head back and eyes half closed, dictating in leisurely fashion the end of a chapter. To his right was a large desk, at which sat Ann, with a writing-pad before her, waiting on his slow and deliberate words. Lacking shorthand, she used an abbreviated form of handwriting of her own invention, and experienced no difficulty in keeping up with the speaker.

"In most of us the voice of the ape-man is still strident. The fears born of his mental

blindness are still with us. Now and again a giant arises, and points the way to the heaven of our soul's desires, but the path is difficult and long, and we are yet bound by selfishness, convention, and black fear. We fight each other, and the way of our progress is strewn with a barrier of ghosts—the bogies that we have created, but which God knows not.”

Ann sighed as she wrote the last word. For over an hour she had sat there, immersed in her work. Reynolds's thoughts came slowly, but he never went back on them. Now he was finished for the day.

“Is that all?” asked Ann.

“Yes. I hope it is all clear.”

“Perfectly. When you said you were going to write a book, I thought it would be a book on art.”

“So it is—the art of living. I daresay it reads like so much bosh to you.”

Ann opened her brown eyes wide.

“I think it is splendid. You say so much that is true, and it rings with sincerity.”

“I wonder.”

“But it does.”

“I mean, I wonder if I am sincere. Words are cheap things. It is not difficult to preach, but to live up to what one preaches! Well, we shall see.”

It was the end of Ann's first week, and already she was in love with her job. For an hour or so a day Reynolds dictated, and the rest of her time was



taken up in typewriting what she had taken down. Occasionally he wrote a few pages, but his writing was so minute and illegible that the dictation method was proving the more satisfactory.

The studio was a veritable marvel to Ann. Scattered about were paintings in various stages of completion—rough drawings of ideas that had come to his fertile soul. And the man himself—he puzzled her considerably, for he seemed to live in a world of dreams for most of the day. Yet there were moments when the quiet eyes flashed, and into that calm face came an expression of immense mental activity. Tony summed him up fairly well.

“The guv’nor’s just like a blooming cat,” he said. “You get the idea he’s asleep—all sleek and wrapped up in himself—and then—then he makes a spring, and—and Gawd help the little mouse!”

“You’ve been with him a long time?”

“Sure I have. Him and me was at Ypres and Vimy Ridge. You wouldn’t have thought he was an artist then. Any of our fellows would have been cut to pieces for him. When I came out of hospital and got my discharge—gas in my innards—I reckoned I was going to have a rough time. But he came along and asked me if I’d like to be batman to him in civil life. You bet I jumped at it. Best boss in the world he is, and no error. Lord, I hope he don’t go and marry that Miss Harmer.”

“Who is she?”

“Stuck up woman—tons of monecy. Keen on

the guv'nor, and comes here a lot. But lately she seems to be a bit keen on Mr. Brent——”

“Brent ! ”

“Inspector Brent of Scotland Yard. Bit of a lad, he is. Him and the guv'nor used to be at school together.”

Ann gasped at this unexpected piece of information.

“Are they—are they friendly now ? ” she asked.

“Sure ! Sort of rivals, though. All I hope is that Brent wins.”

“Isn't that a trifle disloyal ? ”

“Not to my way of thinking. She's the sort of woman who wants the whole world. Maybe she thinks the guv'nor isn't swift enough for her. But she don't know him as I do. Lumme, if she had seen him in that scrap in Plug Street Wood——”

Tony loved nothing better than to find a hearer of this nature, but Ann was not really listening to his blood-curdling narration. She was dismayed at the knowledge that Reynolds knew Brent. If Brent should open his mouth about her father, she might again find herself workless. Then it occurred to her that Brent must know where and how she was gaining a livelihood, for the shadowing process had not yet come to an end. They were still hoping she would lead them to the man they wanted.

. . . . .  
A few days later, Rose Harmer returned from a

trip in Scotland. She rang up Brent, and he called to see her the same evening. Also she rang up Reynolds, but was informed that Reynolds was not at home.

"Has anything happened to Harry?" she asked Brent.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"The threat—you remember?"

"So far no attempt has been made on his life—or liberty. But an extraordinary thing has happened."

"What?"

"You remember I mentioned a girl named Ann Blackham?"

"The girl who was employed at Kettering's?"

"Yes. Kettering had to get rid of her. Where do you think she is now?"

"How should I possibly guess?"

"You could not. She is in the employ of Harry Reynolds."

Rose stared at him in speechless amazement. Then her face grew hard as she recalled Reynolds's sympathy with the girl.

"Is he mad?"

"No. Quixotic."

"But what is this girl doing—with him?"

"I don't know. She goes to his studio at ten in the morning, and leaves at five in the evening. Twice she has been out to lunch with him. I know this because I still have her under observation. Her father is wanted on a serious charge, and she

knows it. She is clever enough never to call on her father. But we shall get him yet, well hid as he is."

"Have you seen Harry since he took on this girl?"

"No."

"But haven't you warned him?"

"About what?"

"You told me the girl's father was working for the Reckoner. Don't you realise that the Reckoner has threatened——?"

"Harry knows that perfectly well. The girl must have told him that I cross-questioned her, and he, in order to have a dig at me, offered her employment. You know him—a dreaming sentimentalist. The girl is pretty, and I fancy Harry is not insensitive to a pretty face."

Rose winced, and the first stab of jealousy entered her soul. There came a burning desire to see this girl—to hear under what pretext Reynolds had employed her. Now she understood his defence of her—his very frequent visits to Kettering's—his growing coldness towards herself. It did not occur to her that of late she had been showing Brent decided favours. It needed but the existence of a possible runner-up to cause that old desire for Reynolds to be rekindled. She decided to lose no time in seeing him.

She was fortunate in the time she chose to call, for Reynolds and Ann were at work together. As

if she owned the place, Rose swept past the resentful Tony and entered the studio. Reynolds was in the middle of a passage. He stopped as the door closed, and turned his head. Rose, in her most intriguing gown, smiled bewitchingly and extended her hand.

"Caught you!" she said.

"You are bound to if you break in like this," he replied drily. "But pray be seated."

Rose accepted the chair, and then gazed directly at Ann, who was twiddling her pencil. Reynolds dealt with the situation calmly.

"Let me introduce you to my—secretary," he said. "This is Miss Ann Blackham. Ann—Miss Rose Harmer."

The two girls nodded at each other, after which there was a tense silence.

"May I speak with you alone, Harry?" asked Rose at last.

"Certainly. Ann, I shall dictate no more this afternoon, thank you."

Ann took her book and left the studio. Rose's critical and rather cold eyes followed the trim form. Something like a little hiss escaped her as the door closed.

"Have a cigarette?" asked Reynolds.

"No, thanks. Why do you always ask me to have a cigarette, when you know perfectly well I always refuse?"

"Good for nerves."



"But my nerves are quite steady. Harry, what does all this mean?"

"Mean? Oh, Ann. She is helping me out with a book. I have always had a desire to write a book, and——"

"Rot!"

"It may be rot, but it is a pleasant change. I find it rather amusing."

"Harry, will you be serious?"

"I am always serious."

"Why did you bring that girl here?"

"I have told you."

"That's all humbug. You are interested in her, and this is just an excuse to give her a job."

Reynolds thought for a moment, and then smiled in his pleasant fashion.

"Well, suppose it was merely that? Is it such a dreadful thing to do? All that is wrong with Ann is that circumstances provided her with a parent who—made a few mistakes. Because of those mistakes Ann has been chivvied by Brent, shadowed as if she were guilty of murder, and shot out of her job. Do you deny one of your own sex a chance of earning a living?"

"Pshaw! You are carried away by a lot of maudlin sentiment. What do you know about this girl?"

"Not very much. But what do you know to cause you to appear so—disgusted?"

"I know she is the daughter of a crook."

"Well, I am the son of one."

“ Harry ! ”

“ Since we are endeavouring to get down to the truth, let us go the whole hog. My respected parent, generous as he was in most things, was not very scrupulous when it came to making money. But he managed to keep within the law, and so managed to retain the respect of the crowd. I have not noticed that you evade me because I happen to be his son.”

“ You are talking nonsense.”

“ I am absolutely serious. Brent is making Ann’s life hell by having her followed, in the hope that she will reveal to the police her father’s hiding-place.”

“ It is Brent’s duty.”

“ Precisely. And it is also Ann’s duty to do nothing that will place her father’s freedom in jeopardy. Isn’t that what every decent girl would do in the circumstances ? Isn’t it what you would do if your own——”

“ Harry ! You are most insulting ! ”

“ I had no intention of being so. I merely want you to see that there is nothing leprous about Ann because she loves her father sufficiently not to betray him.”

“ But don’t you understand that this girl is mixed up with the Reckoner ? The police know that her father has worked for that—that assassin, who murdered Sir Henry Lush, and has even threatened you. The situation is intolerable.”

"I do not find it so. He threatened me, but I am still alive and going strong. In any case, Ann knows nothing about that."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Why?"

"She would not have come here if she had known. As a matter of fact, I find authorship a fascinating business, and Ann earns every penny of her salary. We will leave it at that."

But Rose was not at all willing to "leave it at that," and she considered herself a friend of sufficiently long standing to voice her real feelings.

"The truth is, you are half in love with her," she said tartly.

Reynolds smiled and shook his head.

"The fact that she is here disproves that," he said.

"I'm not so sure. But of one thing I am certain—you are making a fool of yourself, Harry, and will live to regret it. Watch your money—and your reputation."

With this final shot she made her departure. Reynolds sighed plaintively, and sat down at the desk recently occupied by Ann. His fingers found a pencil, and, abstractedly, he commenced to draw faces. There was a long array of them on the clean blotter—soft feminine faces, deftly executed. Ten minutes passed before he realised that his drawings represented varying expressions of but one face—Ann's.

ANN found great pleasure in her work, but two things still militated against complete happiness. One was the threat which hung over her father, and the other the belief that she was in a false position. Rose's visit to the studio had filled her with alarm, for she jumped to the conclusion that Rose had been taken into Brent's confidence and had come there to put Reynolds in possession of certain facts. But, when Reynolds continued to be just as charming, she deduced that her intuition was wrong.

Yet the desire to rid her conscience of this burden was strong. It was possible that he might take a very serious view of the facts—even to the extent of finding another girl to take her place. But she felt that he should be told, and summoned up all her courage to make the confession. Reynolds had noticed a certain nervousness in her behaviour, and one morning he tackled her.

"Aren't you well, Ann?"

"Yes—quite well, thank you."

"Worried?"

"Yes."

"Then don't."

"I—I can't help it." She turned round and faced him. "You have been very good to me, Mr. Reynolds. You gave me this job without asking for references."

"But I already knew you."

"Only to the extent of meeting me at Kettering's. I ought to tell you—I must tell you—that I left Kettering's under a cloud. I—I was discharged."

"Well?"

"It was through nothing which I did myself, but Kettering discovered that my father—is not all he should be."

"What is it that he isn't?" he asked quietly.

"He isn't honest. He did something a long time ago for which he is wanted by the police. A police inspector called on Kettering—and questioned me. Kettering had to consider his own interests. He told me—as kindly as he could—that I must go."

"I see."

"I know I ought to have told you that when you offered me this job, but I was afraid. I didn't want to lose a good chance."

"Then why do you tell me now?"

"Because—I can't go on making believe that I am—a respectable sort of girl."

"Well, aren't you?"

"My father is—not entirely honest. He is in hiding."

"I know," he said calmly. "But that doesn't make you any the worse."

"You know? Then that—that—Miss Harmer told you?"

"She did, but I knew before that."



"And you—you made me that offer, knowing——!"

Her voice was husky, and it all but broke. Reynolds took her hand and pressed it encouragingly.

"Forget it, Ann. No decent person would want to saddle you with another's sins. I am quite aware that Brent is having you watched. Just carry on and don't worry. But I advise you not to attempt to see your father."

"I don't mean to."

"He knows you are employed here?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't want me to come. He hates me to go to work. Always he has been filled with a foolish pride. But someone else forced his hand, and he had to consent."

He raised his eyebrows at this.

"Someone else?"

"A—a friend."

"Is this friend also dishonest?"

Ann stared into space. She knew not how to reply to this.

"Never mind," said Reynolds. "I oughtn't to have asked you that. It is entirely your own business."

"I wish I knew how to answer that question," said Ann. "There are times when I think that all they say about him are lies—terrible lies; and yet—he has been so kind to me. It is because of

him that the police want to find my father—the London police, I mean. They are not greatly interested in the French charge against my father. That is but an excuse to arrest him—and force from him information that may lead them to—this other man.”

“Then your father is in league with him?”

“I—I fear that is true.”

“Is he a bad case?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“But you have seen him?”

“Yes—many times.”

“Then you should know.”

She twisted her hands nervously, and refused to say more.

“Well, let us get on with our work,” he said.

“These are matters for the police to deal with. That is what they are paid for. Where were we?”

It was a great load off Ann’s mind, and she worked with more zest than ever. She tried by various subtle questions to elicit from Reynolds some idea of the probable duration of her present job, for she could not help regarding it as a temporary post. But Reynolds was not ready to commit himself.

“I am a bit long-winded,” he said. “It may last years, unless I burn the manuscript before then.”

“Burn it!” she gasped.

“Do you really think anyone would enjoy reading it?”

“Why, of course!”

“Then I don’t. But it is a pleasure to write it, all the same.”

He puzzled her. Contact with him was a very interesting experience. At times, when her work was completed, she would steal into the studio and watch him at work of a different kind. She saw pictures grow under his skilled hands—clever works, dashed off with a rapidity that surprised her. Now the dreaming man was gone. He seemed to be filled with fire—a regular fountain of marvellous energy.

“Ah, you, Ann! How dare you!”

“I’m—sorry. I didn’t like to interrupt.”

“Did you want me?”

“Yes—no. I—I just wanted to—watch you.”

“What a wicked waste of time.” His keen eyes swept her for a moment. “Stay like that. The light is just right.”

Before she thoroughly realised what he was doing, he had propped a small board on his easel and was making a drawing of her in charcoal. It was a moment of divine inspiration. Reynolds knew it. His fingers could do no wrong. There she was immortalised in splendid line. When it was finished, he still hung over it, as if he did not quite understand what had happened.

“Strange!” he murmured. “I might have spent days—weeks—and never have achieved——”

“May I look?”

She crept to the easel, and saw herself—etherealised, she thought, but she had an eye for genius, and recognised it now.

“It is—wonderful!”

“Not too bad.”

“A little—flattering.”

“Impossible. It is exactly as you always are. Just that little touch of sadness in your eyes—so fugitive—— Ann, you would make a fortune as a model.”

“I don’t wish to be one,” she protested.

“Then we had better destroy this.”

He took the small board in his hands, but her fingers went out and gripped it.

“No—no. That would be vandalism. It is fine work—I know—I know.”

“But I never asked you——!”

To his surprise, a tear welled in her eye and began to trickle down her cheek. She brushed it away swiftly, and made to leave the room, but he retained her.

“Ann, forgive me.”

“There—there is nothing to forgive.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying.”

“Do you mean to say that wasn’t a tear——?”

“Tears are not the same—as crying.”

“Well, I appear to be very ignorant on psychological matters. I thought you objected to my drawing you—without permission.”

"I meant—I meant—— Oh, I don't know what I meant."

She looked distressingly beautiful, with the remnants of a tear still dimming her eye. Reynolds felt the blood rushing wildly through his veins, almost for the first time in his life. He might have taken her in his arms there and then, and there was the possibility that she would not have repulsed him, but his sense of decency forbade. The writing of the book had been but an excuse to help her over a difficult stile. It seemed to him much like treachery to put this wild impulse into effect.

"It is five o'clock, Ann," he said. "How quickly the time flies."

"Yes. I must go home. This evening I move into my new lodgings."

"Where?"

"Purvis Street. Not five minutes from here. I shall save three shillings a week in bus fares."

"Provident girl! Saving up for a rainy day?"

"Yes," she said, quite seriously.

When she left, he went to the windows to close the curtains. Outside it was dusk, and the turgid river still held the last red beams of the sun. He saw Ann leave the house, and, immediately after, the figure of a man moved round a tree and strolled after her.

"Damn!" he muttered.

A minute later the bell rang, and Tony came to inform him that Inspector Brent had called.



"Ask him in," he said tartly.

Brent strolled in, and sat in a chair which Reynolds indicated. His keen eyes went at once to the easel, where Ann's portrait still rested.

"Charming model!" he said.

"Very."

"I thought she was your amanuensis."

"She was—until just now. Now look here, Brent, I know exactly why you called."

"I very much doubt it."

"Rose called recently with the same object. You can save your breath. I was sorry for that poor little girl, whom you take a delight in following about——"

"I!"

"Well, your underlings. I saw a fellow just now—hot on her heels. It's a pity you haven't something better to do. But that's your business."

"It is everybody's business. I certainly did come here in connection with that charming young lady, but my object is not quite what you imagine. I haven't come to warn you that you *may* be robbed. I've come to tell you you *have* been robbed."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Brent put his hand into his pocket and produced a very thin gold watch of beautiful design. Reynolds's eyes opened wide as he saw it.

"No need to ask you whose watch that is?" asked Brent with a smile. "As a matter of fact,

it was I who presented it to you—on behalf of the cricket eleven just before you left Haileybury.”

“So you did. How careless of me!”

“So you missed it?”

“Yes—a few days ago. But I don’t often carry it, and concluded it was somewhere in the house.”

“Well, it wasn’t. Do you know where this was found?”

“I couldn’t guess.”

“On the person of a man we have just arrested—a man named Leeks.”

“Where did he find it?”

“He didn’t find it. Leeks never finds anything except in people’s pockets. Of course, he swears he found it, and that he was about to take it to the police station. But here are a few facts that may interest you. We know for a positive fact that Leeks has been working with Blackham.”

“Blackham!”

“Yes, Blackham, the father of your charming literary assistant. We also know that Blackham is associated with the Reckoner—that he has seen the Reckoner recently. Would you be content to regard the finding of this watch by Leeks as a mere coincidence?”

“The innuendo is perfectly plain,” said Reynolds. “What you are suggesting is that Ann stole it from this house, and handed it over—to someone?”

“Would you call that an unreasonable deduction?”

"I should call it a preposterous one, for I know something of Ann's character, and you are full of preconceptions."

Brent curled his lip.

"How can you know much about that sort of person? These girls are clever. They are brought up in an atmosphere of cunning and deception. You, my dear Harry, are an incurable sentimentalist. You are too eager to see the good in people and to overlook the bad. Do you believe that a girl brought up by Blackham could fail to be dishonest?"

"I have seen chicks mothered by ducks," replied Reynolds.

"You refuse to take this matter seriously?"

"I refuse to believe that Ann stole my watch."

"Why?"

Reynolds eyes twinkled, and he lighted a cigarette before replying.

"My reason, Brent, is quite a sound one. It so happens that I lost the watch before Ann entered this house."

"What?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. So the theory doesn't work. You know, I don't pin much faith to theories. They are so likely to lead one astray. Won't you have a cigarette?"

Brent refused tersely, and a few seconds later remembered an appointment elsewhere. At the door he halted and grinned, in friendly antagonism.

“You’re a good liar, Harry, when it suits you. But I warn you it isn’t wise to shield thieves. I mean to have that gang by the short hairs before very long. Good night!”

*THE SPLENDID CRIME**XVII*

A WEEK later Brent was called to the office of one Samuel Levin, who occupied commodious offices in Holborn. He knew nothing of Levin beyond the fact that he was a prosperous money-lender and a commission agent, and no reason had been given for the urgent request for Brent’s presence.

He found Levin sitting alone in his office, with a hat on his head, looking as infuriated as a human being could look. He was a man of about fifty, immaculately dressed, dark of countenance, with penetrating black eyes—a man one would not be eager to do business with. When he saw Brent, a smile passed over his sharp features.

“Inspector Brent?”

“Yes. You wished to see me?”

“It vos good of you to come. Last night I have been robbed and assaulted.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Have you informed the local police?”

“No. It is for your ears. Look!”

He pointed to the corner of the room. Brent

saw a panelled wall, a section of which was hinged and open—obviously a safe. By the side of it was a square piece of paper affixed to the panelling. He walked across to it and saw the sign of the Reckoner—a pair of scales.

“Busy again!” he grunted.

“Yes. I have seen him.”

“When?”

“Last night—at ten o’clock.”

“You mean—he came in person?”

“The pig—he did!” His eyes blazed with hate. “I had some business to attend to. My chief clerk left at eight o’clock, but I stayed on. The front-door bell rang, and I thought it was the policeman suspicious of the lights. I went to answer it, and that—that swine broke in. He had two other men with him.”

“You saw their faces?”

“Only for an instant. Once they were inside they pulled down masks which were concealed under their hats. The leader—the man who is known as the Reckoner—had no mask. I’d know him anywhere—a face like a baby’s——”

“That was a mask too.”

“What!”

“An ingenious one—but continue.”

“They forced me in here at the point of a pistol, found the key of the safe on my person, and opened it.”

“Was anything taken?”



"Every penny there was in it. The exact amount is eight hundred and fifty-five pounds, ten shillings. There were some share certificates and bonds, but they left those."

"Who actually broke open the safe?"

"The tallest man. The Reckoner stood over me all the time."

"You mentioned assault?"

Levin's face went purple. He suddenly whipped off his hat, and Brent saw a bullet head clipped as close as any racehorse. His gaze went from that to a large photograph on the wall, which showed Mr. Levin possessing a very find hirsute covering.

"He did—that?"

"He covered me with the pistol while the tall man did it. My God! If ever——!"

"Did you call in the policeman?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"What was the use? When they left, I ran to the door and saw them enter a car which they had left farther up the street. They were away in an instant. I—I don't want to be made a laughing-stock."

"This man—the Reckoner—has he threatened you in any way?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"It was two months ago. I had a client—a woman who never paid up the interest on a loan. I

was rung up and told that the best thing I could do was to cancel that debt."

"Who rang you up?"

"A man. He said he was called the Reckoner, and that he would look me up if—if I didn't toe the line."

"I should like the name and address of your client in whom the Reckoner shows such interest."

Levin seemed a trifle reluctant in giving it, but Brent pressed him, and at last got the address. He searched the room for possible finger-prints, but found none. Later he paid a visit to the client. She was a widow living at South Kensington, and appeared to be amazed when Brent mentioned that he was a police officer.

"It is in reference to a Mr. Samuel Levin, with whom you have had a certain business transaction. You recall that?"

"Oh, yes." She wrung her slim hands. "I was driven to it. But still I don't understand. If he intends to issue a summons——"

"Mr. Levin was robbed last night by a person presumably in sympathy with you. Have you any idea who that person was?"

"Certainly not. I may have mentioned to a few intimate friends my—my dilemma, but none of them would—— How could such a thing benefit me? You—you are not suggesting that I——?"

"I am not suggesting anything. It happens that we know who did that robbery, and I should like

you to tell me the names of the friends of yours who were acquainted with your business with Mr. Levin."

She gave him a list of names, and he made a note of them. Later she became more communicative, and stated that Levin was "bleeding" her badly. Already she had paid back, in interest alone, over twice the amount originally borrowed, and Brent worked out the interest at over two hundred per cent.

"I was desperate," she said tearfully. "I had to get my boy to the South of France, and all I have is a small pension. The boy died—last month. There were expenses in connection with the funeral. For two months I have been unable to pay the interest. I wrote to Mr. Levin and explained the circumstances. All he did was to threaten me."

"You have never heard of the Reckoner?"

"The Reckoner! I don't understand."

It was perfectly clear that she was ignorant, and Brent put no more questions in that connection. He was about to leave when the postman called. The woman answered the door, and returned with a bulky registered letter.

"Will you—will you excuse me?" she begged. "It may be urgent."

Brent nodded, and she slit open the big envelope. Inside was a wad of brand-new ten-pound notes and a slip of paper. On the paper was written:  
"To pay Mr. Levin."

"Why!" she gasped. "This is—marvellous. Look!"

Brent pursed his lips as he handled the notes. There were thirty of them.

"May I use your telephone?" he asked.

"Certainly."

He got on to Levin, and asked him for details of the missing money. As he expected, there was not a single ten-pound note among it. The woman was quick to understand his object.

"You think that this——?"

Brent shook his head.

"That is not the stolen money. You certainly have a friend in need."

"But—but what am I to do?"

"Do as you are instructed. Get clear of Mr. Levin."

"You—you think I ought——?"

"Yes. I strongly advise it."

Her eyes brightened, and Brent left her a little later, a comparatively happy woman. He smiled grimly as he made his way back to Levin's office. The Reckoner certainly had a sense of humour, and it still left him with five hundred pounds profit. Levin was still wearing his hat when Brent arrived, and he too had just received a letter—one that caused him to grind his teeth. It was from the secretary of a big London hospital.

"Look at that!" he snarled.

Brent took the letter. It ran:

"SIR,—I have the honour to thank you, on behalf of the Committee, for your very generous gift of £555 10s. towards the upkeep of this hospital, and I beg to enclose official receipt herewith.

"Yours obediently."

"I never sent that," snapped Levin.

"Then you should write and say so."

"I can't. I should look a silly fool. A great friend of mine is on the Committee. It was that—that scoundrel. But what has he done with the other three hundred?"

"Ah, I wonder."

"You saw that woman?"

"Yes."

"Did she confess?"

"Confess what?"

"That she knows the man who robbed me?"

"She knows nothing about him. But you will be glad to hear that she has come into a little money, and means to pay her debt to you."

Levin's little eyes flashed.

"She's in it. I knew she was."

"You will have some difficulty in substantiating that, Mr. Levin. Better not try. No, I am afraid your money has gone. But I still hope we may send for you soon to identify the man who cut—who robbed you."

Levin lost his temper.



“Yah, the police are fools !”

Brent shrugged his shoulders and went out. It was perfectly clear to him that he was up against a clever personage, but he had abundant faith in himself, and prayed that one day he would be rewarded by meeting the Reckoner face to face.

But this was merely the beginning of a new series of robberies attributed to the Reckoner. In some cases the little drawing of the scales was left, in others there was only the method adopted to cause the police to suspect that the Reckoner was the culprit. The Press took up the matter, and Scotland Yard began to look seriously to its reputation.

Ann Blackham read the newspapers with a quaking heart. It seemed to her that this strange personage who had befriended her was over-reaching himself. Against him was now arrayed all the best brains of the police. The day must come—— She experienced a burning desire to see him again, to beg him to give up this dangerous business ere the forces of the law took their revenge.

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME

#### XVIII

DURING the next few weeks Brent's patience was tried to the utmost. He was obliged to call a halt to the watch on the house at Wapping, for it was obvious to him that Blackham had no intention of returning there. But on two occasions Ann had visited it, apparently to remove certain personal

articles. As usual, she was followed there, and back again to her new lodging. It was exasperating to Brent.

"Cunning as a fox," he said. "She won't go within a mile of the old man."

Inspector Fulton, who suffered from no scruples of conscience where his duty was concerned, pursed his lips.

"Why not go on another tack, Brent? Lure her there?"

"How?"

"She'd go to the old man if she thought he was ill."

"You've got to make her believe that."

"Send her a telegram."

"She'd suspect the ruse."

"It's worth trying."

Brent was reluctant to follow such a course of procedure.

"No," he said. "I'm going to see Anton Dubois."

"The Tiger!"

"Why not?"

"You think he will give you a warm welcome?"

"I am not so sure that he will not. At the moment we are not after him, and he knows it. As a matter of fact, I should love to be able to clap a pair of handcuffs on Anton, but he covers his trail so cleverly. I wish the Reckoner would do his business as silently, instead of blazoning it about and causing all this bother. Anton may help us."

"How—and why?"

"He knows all about Blackham, and he loathes the Reckoner. Unless I am deeply mistaken, it was Anton who gave away Blackham's last abode."

"To no purpose."

"I know. But since then Anton may have heard more news. It is worth trying."

Brent had Dubois's address, and Dubois was perfectly aware of the fact. The wily Frenchman never had the slightest fear of the police. He relied upon his intelligence to beat the law every time, and so far he had succeeded, with honours. He lived in a quite nice house in a respectable neighbourhood, and kept three servants. When Brent called, giving his name as *Mister* Brent, he was shown into Dubois's library without delay.

"Welcome, inspector! This is indeed an honour."

"My honour," said Brent, with a grin.

"And what is the latest news?"

"I have called on you to ask that very question."

"In what connection?"

"In reference to certain mutual friends. Your competitor's stocks are going up. He has been quite active of late—so active that I think you will agree it is time a stop was put to it."

"The swine!" growled the Tiger.

"From that I gather there has been no—reconciliation?"

"If ever he and I meet again——"

“So you do not know where and how to meet him?”

“To be candid—no. Is that why you came here?”

“Partly. I am interested in another person, not quite so ingenious—Blackham.”

“Well?”

“I should like to put my hands on Blackham.”

“I see. You think he might help you land the Reckoner?”

“He might.”

The Tiger shook his head several times.

“Blackham couldn’t help you. He’s just a catspaw. I tell you, Brent, that Blackham knows no more about the Reckoner than I do. He just comes and goes—like a shadow. No man has seen his face, and no man ever will.”

“All the same, I should like to meet Blackham.”

“There I can’t help you. He got the cue from someone and slipped away. I haven’t set eyes on him since. But I’ll tell you one thing. He is working with two men named Leeks and Rogers. Find them and you find him.”

“We have already landed Leeks.”

“What!”

“Yes, but we can wring nothing from him.”

“Hm! You ought to be able to find a way to make him squeal. I thought that was your speciality at Scotland Yard.”

“It isn’t quite a star chamber—yet.”

“Well, there’s another man in the know—a lag

named Timothy Bright. He was at the old house, doing a servant's job. He sloped with Blackham. Probably with him now."

"Thanks!" said Brent. "But it doesn't help very much."

"And what do I get for all this?" enquired the Tiger, waving his hands carelessly.

"It may help to reduce your sentence—when we get you," he said.

The Tiger laughed merrily.

"That would be your loss, inspector. Take the cronies, by all means, but leave the big ones behind. In a world of complete honesty there would be no scope for bright young detectives. Take me, for instance. Some fellow is going to get no end of kudos when my time comes—if it ever does."

"I hope it may be me."

"Well, as to that, I have no objection. At least you know your limitations. I simply can't stand some of those fellows of yours who know everything so thoroughly they are too proud to come to better-informed persons for advice. Have an *apéritif*?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, you are welcome—always welcome. Any time you are in the neighbourhood, just drop in."

Brent smiled to himself as he left the house. The Tiger was certainly a tonic, and as clever as any man who had broken the law. That worthy was going to take some "nailing," but Brent reflected



that in his colossal vanity even the Tiger was not quite aware of the amount of information that was slowly filtering into the C.I.D. A word here, an indiscreet remark there—the net was being spread.

The Tiger's remark about Tim Bright caused Brent to reconsider his confrère's suggestion. A telegram in the name of Bright might conceivably disarm Ann's suspicions. But, on the other hand, she might use the telephone and discover the ruse.

That night he met Rose by appointment, and they went to a theatre. But the evening was rather a dull one. Brent was turning things over in his mind—still hesitating.

"Why are you so preoccupied, Malcolm?"

"Am I?"

"You know you are."

"Well, I am concerned about a matter of principle. I want that man Blackham."

"I ought to know that."

"The girl has been shadowed for weeks—in vain. The whole time of two men has been utterly wasted. Now there is a chance of luring her to her father's hiding-place, and I—I don't know what to do about it."

"But isn't it your duty to take any step that may help you to locate a criminal?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Well, I might be able to fake a message that would induce that girl to go straight to her father."

“And you—refrain?”

“I rather dislike taking that step.”

Rose gave a shrug of impatience. This sort of quixotic behaviour did not appeal to her at all—especially in this case. Ann to her was like a red rag to a bull.

“I think you are exceedingly foolish. The girl is a crook, who has both deceived and robbed Harry Reynolds. She is aiding and abetting her father, and is mixed up with a gang of cut-throats and what not, and now you talk as if she were some innocent child. Really it is laughable.”

It required just this little extra weight in the scale to dip it. Brent decided to use the ruse for what it was worth. That night he had a conversation with one of his assistants.

“The telegram will reach the girl soon after seven o’clock. I understand there is a telephone in her lodgings. I don’t want her to have time to ring up her father. As soon as the telegraph boy enters the house you must use the nearest telephone. Tell her it is Tim speaking—Tim Bright. Say that you have been trying to get into communication with her all the afternoon. Ask her if she received your telegram. Blackham is seriously ill. Pile on the agony. This man Bright—I have made enquiries. He is a rough fellow—Cockney intonation. Advise her to take a taxi, and to dismiss the driver some distance from the house. If she takes the bait, follow her, with Hawkins, and phone me at the

office immediately she enters any house. Is that clear ? ”

“ Perfectly, sir. But when she discovers it is a ruse—there may be an attempt at escape. Are we to arrest her as well ? ”

“ Detain her. But do not act unless it is absolutely necessary. I should prefer to be there.”

“ Very good, sir.”

The *coup* was smartly carried out. Ann received the telegram simultaneously with the telephone message. It sounded like Tim speaking—she had no doubt about it.

“ Astring for you,” he said. “ If you come, mind the cops. But ’urry—I’m worried about ’im.”

“ I’ll—come.”

Three minutes later she left the house, casting nervous glances behind her as she walked rapidly towards the nearest taxi-rank. But it was very dark, and she believed she had emerged unseen. With anxious heart she made towards her objective.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XIX

THE Reckoner sat astride the arm of a deeply upholstered chair, facing the scowling but rather nervous figure of Rogers. The mask seemed more than ever livid to-night, and the eyes behind it were steady and discomfiting to the man “ on the carpet.”

"You know what happened to Leeks to-day?"

Rogers moistened his lips and shook his head.

"He was convicted. Three years."

Blackham, who was leaning half across a small table, winced, and Rogers twisted his ugly mouth.

"I—I didn't know," he mumbled.

"Where did this affair take place?"

"Richmond. Leeks met a girl at the cinema, and she—she talked rather a lot. Her people were away—South of France. It was a simple job, but she wasn't in it."

"What did you do with the stuff?"

"Went to Lester. He made an offer, and I got rid of my share, but Leeks wouldn't part up—said he could do better elsewhere."

"Where did they get him?"

"'Star and Whistle.'" Rogers rolled his eyes.  
"Lumme! Three years for that!"

"Listen!" said the Reckoner sternly. "I did a deal with both of you. You've been getting five pounds a week to work for me. Apparently you imagined your time was worth more. Here's the result. If you think you can earn more money, with an equal chance of keeping out of jail, we'll call the deal off here and now. What is it to be? Make up your mind."

"I never said I wanted to chuck you," mumbled Rogers. "We was hard up for 'ready'—lost a goodish bit making a book. I'm satisfied, I am."

"I am delighted to hear it." He turned to Blackham. "Had you any hand in that business?"

"Do I look that sort of fool? My taste does not lie in making love to parlourmaids. I warned Leeks some time ago."

"Pearls before swine. How is Ann getting on?"

"She seems to be contented, but I haven't seen her since that night at the hotel. Every day she rings me up—about this time. They won't leave her alone for a minute—Brent's crowd. I wish to God I knew a way to shake them off. It isn't fair that Ann should be shadowed like—like a thief."

"Brent is still hoping."

"Curse him!"

"So Ann seems—happy?"

"Well, she doesn't complain. But it's an unnatural sort of life for her—with no place to go to. She's not a girl who makes friends easily. That man—Reynolds. He's a bachelor, and Ann is with him a great deal. Is he—safe?"

"Meaning—is he capable of taking advantage of her?"

"Well, she's young—and lonely. She doesn't say much, but I believe she—she is half in love with him."

"What!"

Blackham twisted his face into a scowl.

"Talks about his writing, his paintings. Had the damned cheek to make a drawing of her. If I thought that he——"



The outside bell rang, and all three started. Blackham stared at the closed door, but the Reckoner sat quite still, smoking a cigarette. There came a whispering from the passage, and Tim Bright's voice was heard to say, "Well, I'm blowed!" Then the door opened, and through it came Ann, breathless and excited.

"Father!"

Blackham rose from his chair and gripped her two hands as she came across to him. The Reckoner stared hard, and flung the end of his cigarette into the fireplace.

"Ann!"

She turned and smiled at him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I—I thought father was ill. I received a telegram—also a telephone message—from Tim."

"Tim!"

"It—it sounded like Tim's voice, but he has just told me that—that there is nothing the matter with father, and that he did not ring me up at all."

"Gosh! A plant!" ejaculated Rogers.

The Reckoner took charge of the situation, waving Blackham and Rogers aside.

"How did you get here, Ann?"

"A taxi. I left it at Lime Avenue."

"Did you see anyone loitering near your lodgings?"

"No, but it was very dark."

The Reckoner's face became very grim. He went

to the door and called for Tim, who made grimaces when he saw him, for Tim could never get familiar with that queer mask.

"We are expecting a visitor, Tim," he said. "I don't know how long he will be—probably a few minutes. You will let him in when he comes."

"What!" cried Blackham.

"Silence!"

"Do you mean the police are outside—that it was all a plot to lead them to my——?"

"Assuredly. Inspector Brent fixed it rather well, but I scarcely imagine he expected to find me here. Quite a nice little *coup*."

Blackham whipped out a pistol, but the Reckoner took it from him.

"You will not need that," he said calmly. "Now, Ann. You must leave at once."

"But—what am I to do if I am stopped?"

"You certainly will be stopped, but have no fear; Brent knows his business too well to arrest you. You will simply say you called to see a friend, and waste no breath on details."

"Yes—yes."

"Wait!" said Blackham. "If Brent thinks he has got me cornered like a rat, he is mistaken. Gad, I can still give them a run for their money. The window——"

The Reckoner glared at him, and pointed to the couch.

"Sit down!"

"I tell you——"

"Sit down. You couldn't get a hundred yards. The specials are waiting for their master, but they will hold up anyone who leaves this house. This, my dear Blackham, is quite a little sanctuary. Now, Ann, you must go."

"Me too," said Rogers.

"Oh, no. You are part of the show. You stay just where you are."

Rogers was most unwilling, but he obeyed that voice, and walked to and fro biting his fingernails.

"Tim, show Ann out, and bolt the door after her."

"Blimey! We're for it!"

The Reckoner went as far as the passage with Ann, who was almost too distressed to speak. But ere she left him he smiled at her.

"It may be all right, Ann. I think so. You must trust me."

"Thank God you are here," she murmured.

"But I am afraid—terribly afraid."

He waited until the door closed after her, and then came back to the anxious men.

"They'll get her," muttered Blackham.

"On what charge? Visiting a friend? Oh, no; Brent is so sure of the bigger game. After all these years, Blackham, you seem to be ignorant of the law. Everything favours the crook, believe me. That is why most of the crooks are still at

large. I won't keep you two minutes. Don't move."

He left the room, and Blackham stared hard at Rogers.

"Mad," whispered Rogers. "We ought to have made a bolt for it while we could."

"Perhaps—perhaps he knows best."

"Best! Why, here we are absolutely asting for it. Why the hell did I come here to-night?"

"Because he ordered you to," snapped Blackham. "Don't snivel, for God's sake. For you it may mean three years, but for me—for me——"

He gulped, and his single hand closed on a cushion like a vice. A man of strong nerve normally, he could not stand this suspense. Within three minutes the Reckoner returned. He looked round the room, and then went to a very large grandfather clock, just inside the entrance, that was ticking away the seconds. Its girth was tremendous, and the opened door of the fine case revealed a pendulum swinging. The Reckoner removed the pendulum and placed it behind the clock.

"Splendid!" he said. "And so handy."

There was a ring at the door, and Tim's face came round the door. It was lined with tremendous anxiety.

"The—cops!"

"Only one, I hope. Give him two minutes, Tim."

"Oh, Lord!"

The Reckoner closed the door, and then swung round on the two nervous men.

"I think it is Brent. You will offer no resistance. Leave the rest to me."

With that, he opened the door of the grandfather clock and slipped inside. A dreadful minute passed, and Rogers mopped the perspiration from his brow. Then the bell rang again—and yet again. At last Tim went. He came face to face with Brent, dressed in a fashionable bowler hat and light overcoat.

"Good evening, Mr. Bright!" he said crisply. "Stand aside!"

"Who the——!"

"I have an appointment with Mr. Blackham."

He passed by Tim, and opened the door on the right of the hall. It was the dining-room, and it was empty. He closed the door, and, while Tim gaped, he went to the opposite door and turned the handle. Inside were Blackham and Rogers, apparently talking across a small table. Blackham was facing him.

"You know me?"

"I've never seen you in my life," snapped Blackham.

"I am a police officer, and I hold a warrant for your arrest. I should advise you to——"

Blackham stood up suddenly, and in an instant Brent's hand left his coat pocket, with a pistol



gripped in the fingers. Blackham's scared glance took in the opposing figure, and also the grandfather clock. He saw the door of the latter open slowly, and held his breath.

"No nonsense!" snapped Brent. "Put up your hands, and come this way. The house is surrounded. Don't make things worse by starting any rough business."

At Blackham's hesitation he took a whistle from his pocket, and was on the verge of placing it to his lips when the Reckoner acted. In a second he was behind Brent. A long arm went out and a white pad was clapped over Brent's nose. Crack! The pistol went off as Brent collapsed.

The Reckoner acted with amazing speed. Seizing the pistol, he smashed the electric-light globe, then ran to the hall and came back with an old coat and a neckerchief.

"The clock, Blackham!" he whispered. "And you, Rogers, get into the next room—quick!"

They obeyed him with alacrity. He whipped off Brent's light-coloured coat, also the jacket beneath, and his collar and tie. On went the old coat and a neckerchief. With a piece of the shattered electric lamp he made an incision in his arm and smeared a little blood on the face of the unconscious man, also rumped the hair.

Crash! There was a hammering at the front door. He called to Tim to open it, and then slipped off the mask in the darkness and donned the

light coat. In the pocket of the latter were handcuffs. He placed them on Brent's wrists. The door was flung open, and in rushed two men—one in plain clothes and the other in uniform.

"Got him, sir?"

"Yes, but he nearly got me," said the Reckoner, imitating Brent's incisive voice perfectly. "I had to knock him out, but he'll soon come round. Take him along. Don't wait for me. I want to interrogate the servant. He smashed the light——"

The beam of an electric torch fell on the blood-smeared face, the rumpled hair, and the neckerchief. There was not much of the dapper detective left.

"Must have hit him hard, inspector," said the sergeant. "Looks as pallid as a corpse. You take that end, Arthur."

. . . . .

Outside, Ann was in the care of a plain-clothes man. They had stopped her and questioned her, but had got nothing from her save the admission that she had gone to the house to see a friend. She saw Brent go forward, heard the report of the pistol, and later saw a body being conveyed to the waiting police-car.

"Got him all right," said the sergeant. "We're to take him along. Brent will follow."

"What about this young woman?"

"Brent said we were to detain her until we had made the arrest. Better let her go. We can always find *her*."

Poor Ann was speechless with horror. Something

had gone wrong with the Reckoner's calculations. Was it her father or the Reckoner whom they had got?

"Can I—can I see him?" she begged.

"Better not," replied the sergeant. "He ain't a nice sight. Best thing you can do is to go home."

"No—no. I must see him."

They permitted her to enter the big closed car. The inert figure was propped up in the corner of it—head back.

"Father!" she cried.

Then her heart bounded. It was not her father. It was—it must be—the Reckoner, for it was certainly not Rogers nor Tim! She gazed at the face, but in the poor light the features were not very clear. Bewildered and pained, she left the car and tottered on to the pavement. The kindly sergeant took her by the arm.

"Don't you worry, miss. He ain't hurt much. Just a knockout, that's all. Can we give you a lift anywhere?"

She declined with a shake of her head, and walked on through the darkness.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XX

IMMEDIATELY upon reaching her lodgings, Ann rang up the house which she had recently left, but there was no reply. She waited a few minutes and tried again, with the same result. It seemed to her certain that the Reckoner was in custody, but, if

so, what had happened to her father and Rogers? Why were they not taken away in the car?

She slept scarcely at all, and when she went to her work the next morning her face was rather drawn and her eyes heavy. Reynolds was quick to notice her condition, and suggested that she took a day off.

"No, thank you," she said. "I am quite all right. I didn't sleep very well—that's all."

"You are worried, Ann," he said, with a searching glance. "Isn't that so?"

"Yes. Something—something happened last night."

"What was it?"

"I had a message to tell me that my father was taken ill. I went to see him, and discovered it was all a trick. The police had followed me there and made a raid."

"They got your father?"

"I don't know. Somebody was with him—a friend. When he realised what had happened he told me to leave. The police detained me, and later a man was carried out."

"Carried out!"

"He was unconscious. Brent and he had fought—I think. But it was not my father."

"You think it was—the friend?"

"Yes, it must have been."

"But didn't you see him? Couldn't you be certain?"

"No. It was dark and—and there was a reason why—why I should not recognise him easily."

"This friend, Ann—is he a respectable person?"

She found it hard to answer this question. What could she say about the Reckoner? Certainly he was what the world called a "crook," but there was so much about him that was puzzling.

"I—scarcely know," she admitted. "But he has been kind to me. I know he is wanted by the police—and now they have got him. When I reached home I rang up the house. No one was there. Either my father managed to escape or they took him away later."

"You would like to know the truth?"

"Yes."

"That is easily obtained. I will ring up Brent. He and I are quite old friends. If Brent has made a double capture he will be only too pleased to announce it."

He got on to Brent after some delay, and put his question. Ann tried to follow the conversation from what she heard at her end, but failed to make anything intelligible out of it. At last Reynolds hung up the receiver.

"Have they got him?" queried Ann.

"He wouldn't tell me. Seems to be in a very bad temper about something. It isn't often Brent loses his temper. Says he will look me up during the morning."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ann. "Is he coming here?"



"I suppose so."

"I—I don't want to see him."

"Why not?"

"It would be so—embarrassing. He had that message sent to me. He knows I went to that house to see my father. If by any chance my father has escaped he will——"

"What will he do?"

"How can I face him?"

"You need not. But I see no reason why you should feel as you do. It is quite within the law for you to see your father, without asking anybody's permission. It is Brent who should feel embarrassed, after playing that trick on you. It doesn't seem like cricket to me. But it's always difficult to get the point of view of a police officer. If he calls here you may stay or go—just as you wish."

"Thank you!"

"Now let us do a bit of work."

For an hour he reclined lazily and dictated a new chapter. But it was not his usual pungent stuff. His mind was not working at full pressure. Every few minutes he would stop completely, and Ann's head would come round—and their eyes meet.

"Truth! What is truth, Ann?" he mused.

"I don't know."

"No more do I. We are all living lies. We dare not be our real selves. The world will not permit it. Do you ever feel that you would like to

get away—out of this great circus—into the quiet empty spaces, and live a natural life?”

“But what is a natural life?” she asked, with a smile.

“A life which aims at well-being, without the drug of ambition, the lust for power, the craving for the adulation of the mob. A life in which there would be more sympathy, more honesty of purpose, more love.”

“You make me dream dreams.”

“Perhaps life too is a dream, and death the reality.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Too cynical? Well, yes. Life should be a beautiful thing, and we have the power to make it so. But we don’t.”

He began to trace spirals on the blotting-pad which was near him, and Ann waited in vain for him to continue with the book, but Tony announced Brent before he could get his thoughts into that channel.

“Well, Ann,” he said, “are you going?”

“No. I have changed my mind.”

“Splendid! It’s courage that counts. Show Inspector Brent in, Tony.”

Brent looked as savage as an unfed menagerie lion when he entered the room. Reynolds greeted him familiarly, and Brent grunted a reply. Then he looked at Ann, and Ann returned the look.

“I fancy there is no need for introductions,” said Reynolds.

"None at all," snapped Brent. "Miss Blackham and I are quite old friends."

"Good! Then we can all be honest and candid. Ann is worried about her naughty parent. You can appreciate that?"

"Quite."

"She wants to know the worst—or the best."

"You think he may possibly be behind a grille?"

Ann shuddered at this remark.

"Well, is he?" asked Reynolds.

"No—worse luck!"

Ann could not repress a sigh of great relief, and Brent grinned at her.

"Clever work," he said. "Your father's friends are quite smart people. Have you told Mr. Reynolds how it all worked out?"

"I don't know—anything. I was told to leave the house at once—and I went. I heard a pistol-shot from inside, but who fired it I have no idea. Then—then they brought out a man—a stranger—and I was permitted to go home."

"You didn't know this stranger?" queried Brent anxiously.

"No. But I thought—I thought——"

"Well?"

"I thought it might be the—the Reckoner."

"Well, it wasn't," admitted Brent. "It was another man: I'll be frank about it. The Reckoner got away."

"Oh!" gasped Ann.

"You are—pleased to hear that?"

"I am surprised. That is all."

Brent shook his head.

"Your relief is evident," he said. "Now, listen to me, Miss Blackham. I don't blame you for sympathising with your own father. He may or may not deserve sympathy. That is neither here nor there. I consider myself entitled to use any means to effect his arrest, and I shall do it, even if I have to put certain people to inconvenience. But in one respect your conduct is wrong. It is your duty to assist the police in getting the other man—the Reckoner. It is everyone's duty to put a murderer where he ought to be."

"But——!"

"You think that is an exaggeration. I tell you it is true. This man is a killer—when it suits his purpose."

"It isn't true. It can't be true," said Ann.

"You say that because he has played down to a sentimental public at times, by robbing the robbers, taking toll from well-placed social parasites. But I say that when it suits him he kills. Sir Henry Lush was shot for gain. It is only recently that we learned that Sir Henry carried on his person a document of the greatest value. The possession of that document was the motive for the crime. It was in code, but all codes can be de-coded. A certain foreign Government would pay a very large sum to learn the contents of that document. That

is the type of man whom you are shielding—a man ready to sell his own country, and commit murder in the bargain.”

“One moment,” put in Reynolds. “How is Ann shielding this man?”

“She knows a great deal about him. Until recently she has met him at various places——”

“It is not true,” cut in Ann. “I know nothing—nothing. He used to come and see my father, but I was never present when they were together. I know nothing about him.”

“You mean, you refuse to say anything about him?”

“I have no information to give.”

“There are a hundred points on which you could enlighten us.”

“You are—quite wrong.”

Brent stuck out his jaw pugnaciously.

“Aren’t you a little fond of him?”

“What do——?”

“Has he ever made love to you?”

Reynolds gripped Brent by the arm, and his eyes clearly conveyed his resentment. Ann stood up and quickly left the room.

“That reached home,” mused Brent. “I know what I am saying, Reynolds. You are so blind you will not see facts. I’ll admit she’s attractive—especially to a man like you, who is some judge of beauty. But she is playing either a cunning or a damned silly game. This Reckoner chap is as clever



as the devil. He has lied to her—got her sentimentalising. Pretends he wants her to go straight, and all the time he is roping her in. One day she will vanish, and we shall hear no more of either of them.”

“I’ll stake my life you are wrong,” said Reynolds. “I’ll admit the old man is a bad lot—or has been—but that doesn’t make Ann any less decent. You carry on, and get your man, and leave Ann alone. I’ll look after her.”

Brent raised his eyebrows at this.

“As bad as all that ?” he said, with a short laugh.

Reynolds flushed up.

“Interpret that how you like, but I’m sick of seeing her pestered and persecuted. For two pins I’d take her away to the South of France, and risk what the gossips might say.”

“I hope you won’t be so infernally silly. What’s bred in the bone—— You know the rest.”

They parted as friends still, Brent believing that Reynolds was an incurable sentimentalist, and Reynolds returning the compliment by voting Brent the most prejudiced and blindest of human sleuth-hounds. Ann returned when she heard the door close after Brent.

“Splendid fellow,” said Reynolds—“if only he would take himself a little less seriously.”

“You think it was true—what he said about the Reckoner ?”

"Would it hurt you much if it were true?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know—quite. But when someone has been good to you—when you have got into the way of thinking that what has been said of them is all assumption—vile rumour, then to hear that——"

"It may not be true. Your faith should be strong, Ann, even when things look black. Pay no attention to what Brent says. Just carry on, and keep smiling. At least your father is still free."

"But I can't understand it."

"No. But Brent can. It looks rather as if the Reckoner scored off him badly. Quite an interesting character that. Look, the sun is breaking through the mist. I vote we go for a walk."

"But I——"

"It will do you good—and me too. Brent has filled this room with horrible spectres. Come, and if we sight any of Brent's 'specials' we will lead them a pretty dance."

It was a new experience for Ann, and she enjoyed it immensely. She recalled what he had said about running away to the quiet places of the earth, and she blushed at the length to which her thoughts were taking her.

WEEKS passed, and Ann heard no more from the Reckoner, nor from her father. This strange silence puzzled her. At least she expected to hear something from Blackham. There was the telephone and the post! Then one morning came a message through a surprising channel. Reynolds received a telegram. It said:

*Tell Ann quite well. Impossible communicate other means. B. is very active. Love.*

"He doesn't say where he is," she complained.

"All the better. For it will leave your conscience clear. I suppose you love him, Ann?"

"Yes. What he did he did chiefly for me. The Government did not treat him too well when he lost his arm in the war. To me he has always been generous."

"The usual tale, I suppose. He got in with a bad lot?"

"Yes. There was a man named Dubois—who is called 'the Tiger' by those who know him. It was he who first started my father on the wrong tack. He is a—a monster. They quarrelled about something and parted. But recently he found my father again, and it was he who informed the French police, because my father refused to agree to an infamous proposal—concerning me."

Reynolds became very serious.

"I am afraid there is no hope for your father in England. He is a marked man. He may run for a little while, but sooner or later the police will get him."

"That is the fear that haunts me."

"If your father loved you he would clear out of your life."

"But I don't want him to go."

"Wouldn't you like to see him starting anew—in a different country?"

"It isn't possible. His disability is against him, and he has no money. Also there would be difficulties about a passport."

"Suppose that could be arranged?"

"How?"

"I don't think it would be difficult."

Ann thought for a few seconds and then shook her head.

"He wouldn't go, unless I went with him."

"And would you?"

"I—I don't know. I have never even thought about it. Why do you put such ideas into my head?"

"A girl should have a chance to make good, without having an incubus round her neck. While your father is at large, Ann, you will get little rest from the police. I have a friend in Canada, who runs a large business. He might be willing to give your father a new start in life, and ask no questions about the past."

"That would be wonderful."

"And you would be prepared to go with him?"

"Yes."

"You really mean that?"

"It is the least I can do. He—he is still my father."

"That means you would only go as a matter of duty."

"Isn't duty almost the same as love?"

"Almost—but not quite. But the last word must come from you, Ann. Think it over, and let me know. Then, when you discover where your father is, we will try to fix things for him."

"How—how good you are."

But, on thinking it over, Ann became aware of some serious obstacles. One was her present job. She liked the work, and was growing very proficient at it. The other was that she liked her employer to a much deeper extent that she had imagined possible. He had taken her out of a rut—shown her a new world, made her feel that she was someone. Even her admiration for the Reckoner had almost gone. She told herself that she had been foolish in letting her imagination run away with her. At the best the Reckoner was but a clever crook, a man who walked by night, and who had gained an influence over her father.

The artist was quite another creature. He filled her mind with splendid ideas, and was fast turning her into a dreamer too. Now he was putting this



difficult problem before her, and the solution gave her seriously to think. This filial devotion had its limits. It did not blind her to certain facts, and the hardest of these was that her father had become demoralised through idleness. In her heart she believed that he would not—could not—hold an honest job. He might, indeed, be glad of an opportunity to escape from the police, but she could not imagine him working. He had tasted easy money, and the taste was pleasant to him.

But she was far too proud to admit this to Reynolds. It was much like treachery—unforgivable disloyalty. Even though such a step were folly, and the end of a dream, she saw plainly that she must go through with it.

“I have been thinking over what you said,” she informed Reynolds. “If your friend in Canada will give my father a chance, I will go with him.”

“You think you will keep him straight?”

“Yes—yes.”

“Very well. The next step is to locate him.”

In the meantime Rose Harmer had been wrestling with a problem of her own. In her life jealousy played a very big part, and the continued presence of Ann in Reynolds’s house was a constant sting to her. It had the effect of causing her to forget Reynolds’s coldness to herself. All she desired to remember were little incidents in the past when she and Harry were much closer to each other. How could that old love be revived? Brent—Brent she

had used as a plaything—a foil to Harry, and he had served so long as Reynolds continued to steer a solitary course. But now her desire to beat that conniving daughter of a crook was almost an obsession. Brent had proposed to her again—and again she put him off with a vague promise. Old Harmer saw how things were going, and sought to give her a piece of fatherly advice.

“Don’t fall between two stools, Rose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Brent is in love with you. Why keep him dangling?”

“I don’t want to do anything in a hurry.”

“Of course not, but he is a splendid fellow—very different from—Harry Reynolds, for instance.”

“Comparisons are odious at times.”

“Well, Harry seems to have gone clean off his head. Writing a book! Tch!—he cannot write a decent business letter. Just a dodge to flirt about with that girl.”

“I think you are wrong, father.”

“Wrong! I’m positive about it. He knows what she is. Everyone is talking about it.”

“Everyone!”

“Well, at the club. He doesn’t go there much now, but you can’t prevent a scandal like that being well circulated. He has been seen with her—in public. Do you imagine that men of the world are going to swallow the sort of story he would like them to believe. I really am disappointed in Harry.

His father was very different—very different. Keen ! My dear, you had to get up very early to score off Henry Reynolds.”

“ Harry doesn’t appear to be very proud of his father.”

“ Most ungrateful—after he inherited his father’s money.”

“ I don’t think he used any of it. He lives upon what he earns by painting.”

“ So he makes believe. I have no patience with him. Too much hot air and dreaming.”

Such remarks did not weaken Rose. She was piqued, and to her the only satisfaction lay in bringing Harry to his knees. In a few days her birthday was due, and in order that Reynolds should not overlook it she invited him to the party. Reynolds did not want to go, but he had no wish to hurt her feelings, and ultimately accepted.

It was quite a small gathering, at Harmer’s house, and it included Brent and Swinton and one or two relatives. Rose had got herself up well for the occasion, and she knew how to enhance her natural beauty. She had begged Reynolds to play a violin solo, and Reynolds had reluctantly succumbed to her blandishments. The thing was quite a success.

“ Splendid ! ” said Swinton. “ Harry, you ought to have gone on the concert platform. Now, Brent, it is your turn to perform.”

“ I have no parlour tricks,” confessed Brent. “ Harry always had a monopoly in that respect.”

"By the way, did you ever hear anything further in connection with that note you received here—from the Reckoner?" asked Swinton.

"Not a word or a sign. It was just bluff."

"Can't we leave the Reckoner's name out of it—on my birthday?" pleaded Rose.

"But he won't be left out of it. Lord, if you had suffered my experience——"

Evidently he had not forgotten what had happened to him, and he gulped down a glass of wine as if to remove a nasty flavour from his mouth.

"No nearer, Brent?" he enquired.

"Very much nearer, I think. I shouldn't mind making a wager that we will hang the Reckoner within six months."

All stared at this bold remark.

"But he has to be caught first—and then convicted," said Harmer. "Conviction is going to be difficult, isn't it? Certainly he threatened Sir Henry Lush, but is that sufficient proof?"

"No, but I think we have all the proof we need."

"What proof?"

Brent looked as if he rather regretted his impetuous remark, but he felt he now had to justify it.

"When Sir Henry was shot the murderer was hidden behind a tree in the grounds. When firing the shot he steadied himself by placing his left hand against the trunk of the tree. Luck served him badly, for the tips of his fingers fell on a patch of

half-dried gum. I found the impressions the following morning."

"Well!" gasped Swinton. "That was smart!"

"It was more by luck than observation," said Brent modestly. "I had the impressions photographed. The thumb is missing, but the four fingers are beautifully clear. When—when we get the Reckoner I shall expect to find identical markings on the fingers of his left hand, and then—then the jury will find their task comparatively simple."

"Congratulations!" said Swinton, rubbing his hands together. "A neat bit of work that. Wouldn't I love to see him——!"

"Do change the subject," begged Rose. "It is getting on my nerves. Any more coffee for anyone?"

Later she managed to get Reynolds by himself, on the plea of showing him her numerous presents. Her father's gift was in the garage, and thither she escorted Reynolds. It was a beautifully turned-out two-seater car that must have cost a small fortune.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"Splendid! You are very lucky to have a rich father."

"You talk as if you were poor."

"I am. A struggling artist."

She laughed amusedly and pinched his arm.

"You old hypocrite! Why, your father left you over sixty thousand pounds. Why don't you spread yourself a bit?"



Reynolds pursed his lips and made no reply.

"Harry!"

"Yes."

"You must come and help me christen my new car. I want to run out to Windsor to-morrow. Will you?"

"I'd love to, but I have to go out of town."

Her eyes flashed.

"You mean you don't want to?"

"You know I mean nothing of the sort. I really have important business to attend to."

"Don't you want to please me at all? Of late you have been so—so distant. And we used to be such friends. Harry, come, forget this business and be a knight errant."

Her hand was on his arm, and her eyes were full of mystery—of passion even. Reynolds was not proof against the appeal of beauty. His eyes took in her round white shoulders, from which the wrap had slipped—and not by accident. The fingers on his arm were moving—nervously clutching him.

"This is my birthday, Harry," she said softly. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She had got very close to him—face upturned and her lips held up invitingly under his.

"You will come, Harry?"

"If—if you really wish it."

"You dear!" Swiftly she seized his neck and kissed him on the mouth. The next moment

Brent appeared—in a hurry, with his coat and hat on.

“I was just showing Harry my new car,” said Rose. “But what is——?”

“I am sorry, I must leave at once. An important arrest is pending.”

“Not—the Reckoner?”

“Not yet. But we are a step nearer, I think.” He shot Reynolds a quick glance. “At the moment it is—Blackham.”

Reynolds started.

“You—you mean that?” he asked tensely.

“Yes. I have had him cornered for weeks. It was only a question of time. Good night!”

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXII

BRENT had made no idle boast. That night Blackham was arrested in a lodging-house on the outskirts of London. Reynolds was rung up the following morning and given the news by Brent.

“Better tell the girl,” he advised. “She can see him if she wants to—before he goes to France. Cheerio!”

Reynolds sat and stared out at the river. The inevitable had happened. Poor Ann! And just when he was making plans to assist Blackham in getting out of the country! She came to work, punctual to the minute, and was met by a very serious face.

"I am afraid I have bad news for you, Ann."

"Bad news!"

"Your father——"

"He—— They haven't got him?"

"Yes—last night."

"Oh!"

He caught her hand and pressed her into a chair. For a few minutes she sat there, wringing her hands, and incapable of speech.

"Where—where did they find him?" she quavered at last.

"Richmond."

"And Rogers, is he——?"

"Brent only mentioned your father. I presume Rogers was not there."

"Where—where is he now?"

"At Scotland Yard. You may visit him if you wish. But you must go at once, for he will leave England almost immediately."

"Leave England!"

"He was arrested on an extradition order. There is a grave charge standing against him in France."

"But he didn't do it. He told me once, it was all a mistake—a 'frame-up' he called it. The Tiger planned it to get him into his clutches."

"That is quite possible. But what will you do?"

"I must see him. May I go now?"

"Yes. Would you like me to come with you?"

"Oh, could you—could you?"

"Of course."

He had forgotten every word about his promise to Rose. She did not count in the face of Ann's trouble. He must help to lessen her grief by every means possible.

. . . . .

At Scotland Yard, Brent was having an interview with the prisoner. He found Blackham sullen and vicious ; for Blackham suspected, and not without reason, that Rogers had gone back on him.

"Now," said Brent, "there are one or two questions I should like to put to you."

"You can keep them," snarled Blackham. "And you have no right to ask them."

"Well, we will put it another way. Would you care to make any statement regarding your associations with a certain person ?"

"Who ?"

"The Reckoner."

"No, I would not."

"Your loyalty is most commendable. Strange how an old hand like you can be hoodwinked."

"Hoodwinked !"

"Well, we found you through following certain hints that were supplied gratuitously."

"You're a liar," said Blackham. "I know how you traced me. It wasn't the Reckoner. It was that dirty little skunk, Rogers, who saved his hide at my expense. I shall remember that."

"I am afraid your excellent memory won't be of much use if the French court convicts you. I know nothing about Rogers. Our information did not come through him. Wouldn't the Reckoner stand to benefit if—if you were put away for a long stretch?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have an idea he is rather interested in your daughter."

It was a lucky shot. Blackham's lips compressed until they almost disappeared from view. The old spectre reared its head again. But he was cunning enough to think before he made any impetuous remark.

"Is that the sort of trickery the police get up to these days?" he said bitterly.

"You suggest I am trying to play you off against the Reckoner, eh?"

"It doesn't need much gumption to see that."

"Would you like to see proof?"

"You'd never prove that to me."

"I think I shall, unless you are a man of more obtuse mind than I imagined. Before Sir Henry Lush was murdered he received a threat—the thing that the Reckoner usually sends. It was just a strip of paper wrapped round a cigar, with a neat design on it. This is the article. Just hold it up to the light."

Blackham took the improvised cigar-band and held it up as instructed. He saw a watermark—the



letters "MASCO——" dead in the centre. Brent took it from him and produced a full sheet of paper of exactly the same colour and quality. He held it up for Blackham to see. The watermark was now complete. It was *Mascot Parchment*.

"Well?"

"You may read what is on the back of it."

Blackham stared at the printed lettering, and a growl of rage came from his throat as he read the brief message:

*"You will find Blackham at No. 36 New Bridge Street, Richmond."*

"By God!"

"Do you still doubt the source of our information?" asked Brent.

"It—it's a fake. You did it to——"

"I admit that is a good argument, but you have to remember that we found you there. No, Blackham, I'm telling you the truth. You've been used as a tool by a man cleverer than yourself. The result is—you are here. Is there any reason why this other man should not get what is coming to him, without undue delay?"

"The—dog!"

"Tell me what you know."

Blackham pulled himself together, and then shook his head.

"It's no use. I know nothing."

"Come!"

"I tell you I know nothing. I did a job or two for him, but I've never so much as seen his face."

"You communicated with him?"

"Never. He always communicated with me—chiefly through the telephone."

Question after question was put, but the information obtained was negligible. Eventually Brent went out, bitterly disappointed.

"Nothing doing?" enquired a confrère.

"No. If he were able to squeal, he would. He is as much in the dark as we are."

While they held an informal conference Ann turned up. She was given permission to see the prisoner, but a warder was present all the time. Tears came when she realised the hopelessness of things. Blackham hugged her closely, with genuine affection.

"Don't cry, Ann," he begged "I am not convicted yet."

"But they are taking you to France. What hope is there—in a foreign country?"

"There is always hope. Ann, on my life, I am innocent of that charge. Do you—do you believe that?"

"Yes. Father, if only I could find—our friend——!"

He knew whom she meant, and a look of hatred entered his eyes. Ann was amazed at this.

"But he is clever," she whispered. "Even now he might——"

"You don't understand, Ann," he interrupted hoarsely. "It was he who betrayed me to the police."

"Father!"

"Yes—yes. I have seen the proof. Brent would never have found me but for him."

"But he saved you before! Why did he——?"

"He saved *himself*, you mean. He is mighty clever at saving himself. If you ever see him again tell him that I know—and that one day I will square accounts."

Ann was rendered speechless by this amazing charge.

"I can't believe it," she said after a long silence.

"He—he couldn't do it."

"Couldn't he? He wanted me out of the way."

"For what purpose?"

He looked at her fixedly.

"Ask yourself, Ann. Hasn't he been *nice* to you? Hasn't he tried—aye, and succeeded—in arousing your interest, winning your gratitude? He wants you, Ann, and he knew that I was against it. He means to play up to your helplessness——"

"But I am not helpless. I need no one's help now. For the first time in my life I am capable of earning my own living—honestly. If—if ever I was attracted by him—that is all over. Father, you mustn't worry about me. It is you that matters. Perhaps—perhaps they may fail to convict you.

We must hope. That is the only thing left—hope.”

“Ann, that man you are working for—is he straight?”

“Mr. Reynolds? Why, he is simply splendid. It was he who helped to get me this interview, and who accompanied me here.”

“The Reckoner has a grudge against him—did you know that?”

Ann gave a great start.

“You—you must be mistaken.”

“I am not.”

“But he let me go there! Oh, I’m puzzled—mystified. Why should Mr. Reynolds be threatened?”

“I don’t know. But the Reckoner will get him. He never fails.”

Here the warder interrupted, and the conversation was cut short. There was a painful farewell, and Ann, fighting against a complete breakdown, left the cell. Outside she found Reynolds.

“You—you saw him?”

“Yes,” she replied chokingly. “And I have heard something—something inexplicable—unbelievable.”

“What?”

“He was betrayed to the police by the man he called his friend.”

“What man?”

“The Reckoner.”

“Ah! You didn’t expect that to happen?”

“I never dreamed of such a thing. Please—please take me home. I feel—ill.”

. . . . .

That night saw the Reckoner abroad again—on a personal quest. It was cold and miserable in the streets, and east of St. Paul’s the fog was gathering. The Reckoner hailed a taxicab in a quiet street and bade the driver go to Houndsditch. A quarter of an hour later he alighted, gave the man half a crown, and slipped away into the fog.

In a dingy street he found a public-house, and went inside. It was full of low characters, from racing-tipsters to sneak-thieves. The Reckoner knew some of them, and as he mingled with the crowd furtive glances were shot at him. The clever mask passed scrutiny, but it always created an impression. The man he sought was not there, so he resumed his search in other quarters. Two hours later he entered a billiards saloon. The place contained a dozen tables, all of which were in use.

The Reckoner wandered from one to another, and at last he found the man he wanted. He was one of a party of five—engaged in a game of snooker—a lean fellow, with a murderous face, a nose that had been broken at least twice, and a bullet head. Once or twice he made savage ejaculations, with a strong nasal intonation. This



was Walt Jukes, hireling of the Tiger, a professional gunman from the worst quarter of Chicago.

With a mug of beer before him, the Reckoner watched the game. These men were playing for quite high stakes, and Jukes seemed to be doing extremely well. Play went on for a long time, and drinks were supplied long after licensing hours. But at last the party broke up. The Reckoner sidled out of the saloon and waited in the rain outside.

After a lapse of time Jukes emerged, huddled in a big coat. He was with a companion, but the latter left him at the corner of the street, and Jukes made down a passage towards his diggings. Hot on his heels, treading noiselessly, came the Reckoner. Just before the passage joined a main street the Reckoner overtook his quarry. Jukes heard a faint sound behind him and swung round. Instantly an arm encircled his neck and a chloroformed pad was clapped over his mouth. There was a brief struggle, and then—silence and a collapsing man.

The Reckoner carried the heavy body into a niche where it was unlikely anyone would find it, and then went into the street and searched for a taxi. It was some time before he could find one, but at last his efforts were rewarded. He approached the driver, simulating mild intoxication.

“Friend o’ mine—hic—had drop too mush. Up the street—hic—two hundred yards. I’ll show you.”

He stopped the vehicle near the alley, and then got out and found his victim. With a great effort he got Jukes to the taxi.

"'s all right, old bean. I'll see you home. Wunnerful evening we've had."

When Jukes was safely placed inside the taxi his escort gave the driver an address at Wapping—Blackham's derelict house. The man drove there at a good rate of speed, and deposited the pair at the required spot. The Reckoner sat Jukes on the step and gave the driver a handsome fare.

"Cheerio!" he said.

The driver grinned and pocketed the money. Half a minute later the Reckoner was carrying Jukes into the dark and silent house. Down into the cellar he went—where Swinton had once languished for six months. Into the same close prison his burden was taken, and laid on the truckle bed while the Reckoner proceeded to complete his task.

From his pocket he produced a sheet of paper, some printer's ink, and a brush. The paper was duly prepared, and then impressions were taken of both of Jukes's hands. When that was successfully accomplished Jukes was bound securely, and brought to consciousness with the aid of brandy. The evil eyes opened, and slowly focused themselves on the strange face before him.

"What the——! By God—the Reckoner!"

JUKES's enormous surprise changed to terror, and then to rage. He made a violent effort to free himself, but discovered that his bonds were most cleverly fixed. The Reckoner shook his head.

"Why waste your strength, Mr. Jukes? You merely make yourself tired. How is friend Anton?"

"What—what do you want with me?"

"I was just interested to get you by yourself. I found this little toy in your pocket, all clean and bright."

He picked up an automatic pistol and balanced it in his hand. Jukes's eyes narrowed.

"What tales it could tell if only it could speak! There was Wing Soo, the Chinaman; Sir Henry Lush——"

"You lie!"

The Reckoner was quite unperturbed.

"That was a foolish business—the latter. But I suppose Anton got a pull on you. What did Anton do with the papers you got for him?"

"I tell you——!"

"Yes, I am asking you."

"I dunno what you're talking about. I've never heard of Sir Henry Lush."

"You may hear quite a lot about him—later. But while you are taking a little rest, here, from

your normal occupation of gunman, you may feel inclined to answer a few questions."

"Blast you! You'll get nothing out of me."

"Not at this moment, perhaps. What you need is time for reflection, and you shall have it. Shall we say—to-morrow? Yes? In the meantime I shall have to prevent you from raising your voice. It is scarcely likely anyone would hear you through these thick walls, but one never knows. Open your mouth!"

He advanced with a large silk handkerchief in his hand. Jukes closed his great mouth like a steel trap, but, on his nose being gripped, his mouth opened and the Reckoner stuffed the handkerchief into it, and held his hand over it while he produced a second handkerchief, with which he kept the gag in place.

"I think that will do," he mused. "To-morrow I may bring you something to eat and drink, but it depends upon your attitude. Pleasant dreams!"

He switched off the light, locked the stout door on the outside, and went upstairs. A few minutes later he crossed the garden and was making westward.

. . . . .

Days passed, and Jukes maintained his stubborn attitude. Each night the Reckoner came and surveyed his prisoner, bringing into the cell beer

and sandwiches, and leaving them where Jukes could see them when the light of day filtered through the grating into the place. On the fourth night, Jukes could stand it no longer. He nodded his head to express his desire to speak. The Reckoner removed the gag.

"A drink—quick!" he croaked.

He was given a mouthful of beer.

"More!"

"You won't hurt for a few minutes. Now then—the Tiger got those papers?"

"Yep."

"What did he do with them?"

"Took them home with him. He has a safe in the wall of his library—near the fireplace."

"They were in code?"

"Yep. He couldn't read a word of it. There's a man in Russia ready to pay a big price, but the Tiger won't do a deal until he knows the contents. Thinks he might be able to get more money when he knows exactly what they are about."

"Is he engaged in decoding them?"

"Sure! There's a Jap named Siki who goes to his house each day. He's clever at that sort of work, but that thing has got him guessing. He hasn't struck the right key yet."

"That safe—has it an ordinary lock?"

"No; combination letter. Anton finds a new word every day."

"I want those papers."



"You'll never get them. For God's sake give me some more drink. I'm——"

This time he was allowed to help himself liberally, and the Reckoner untied his hands for a few minutes while he ate. But immediately afterwards the hands were secured again, despite his violent protests.

"Ain't you going to let me go? I've done nothing, and I've told you—everything."

"Not everything. Tell me how you planned that job."

"What job?"

"The shooting of Lush."

"I never planned nothing. You try and prove it. I'll admit some papers were stolen, but that's all there was to it. How long are you going to keep me here?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind. It depends upon what happens with the Tiger."

Jukes opened his eyes wide.

"Are you going there?"

"I am."

"Fool! He'll get you. You may think yourself smart, but you can't put anything over on Anton. I tell you he'll get you."

The Reckoner smiled, and held up the gag in the tips of his fingers. Jukes showed his yellow teeth in hate.

"Do you want to corpse me?" he snarled.

"Wouldn't you prefer that to—the gallows?"

"Gallows!" Jukes's face went pallid, but his old assurance came back at once. "You can't kid me. Why, if I told you I put that fellow through, that wouldn't commit me. It's proof that a jury needs—and that'll take some getting. Anyway, I didn't do it."

The insertion of the gag stopped his further remarks. The Reckoner gazed at him for a moment with deep contempt, and then left him once again.

Midnight found the Reckoner in a different part of London—outside the house of the Tiger. Looking across the garden, he saw a light in the hall, and a small, thin ray striking through a window on the north side of the house. He entered the garden and made his way towards the north side. Curtains were drawn across the casement windows, but the opening which let the light through permitted him to see into the room.

Seated at a desk was the Tiger, engaged in writing. He had a decanter of spirits and a syphon of soda-water close to his elbow, also a pile of papers in front of him. The Reckoner waited patiently, and at last the Tiger put down his pen, stretched himself, and took up the pile of documents. He divided them into two parts, one of which he placed in his pocket. The second batch he carried across the room. Near the fireplace he stopped and pressed a button. A panel above him flew open, and revealed the knob of a steel safe. He twiddled it,

and the big door opened. The papers were deposited inside, and the safe closed. Then the room was plunged into darkness.

The Reckoner stood back from the house and gazed at the windows above him. They were all in darkness, and remained so after a lapse of some minutes. He wandered to the front of the house, and saw a light on the top floor to the left of the entrance. It was fairly obvious that this was the Tiger's bedroom.

The waiting man moved round the house again and approached the casement windows. A brief examination with an electric torch revealed the latch. He produced a queer instrument, and in two minutes had the window open. He closed it behind him, but did not fasten it. Then he found the switch, and illuminated the room.

An examination of the safe proved that without knowledge of the keyword it could not be opened, except by an engineering feat which was out of the question at the moment. But the possession of the stolen document was not his immediate desire. He sat and smoked for a while, after he had satisfied himself that the room contained no bureau. Then, having given the Tiger time to get to sleep, he resumed his search. There was nothing of any value to him on the ground floor, and he was forced to the conclusion that any letters or papers of importance, apart from those in the safe, were in the Tiger's bedroom.

He crept up the stairs and ultimately stopped outside the room in which he had seen the light. Listening intently, he heard the sound of heavy breathing. On turning the handle, he discovered, somewhat to his surprise, that the door was not locked. He entered without a sound, and produced his torch. The thin ray of light travelled round the room. It revealed the Tiger, asleep, a wardrobe, a dressing-table, and a bureau. He immediately turned his attention to the bureau. Inside was a bundle of papers and several letters. Searching carefully, he at last found what he wanted. It was a letter from Russia, couched in French. Translated, it ran :

*I agree to your terms. I shall arrive in London on Friday, January the 15th, and will call at nine o'clock at your house. The money will be in Bank of England notes, as requested.*

SAMOVIEV.

The Reckoner smiled and closed the bureau, leaving things exactly as he had found them. He turned the torch on the Tiger's slumbering form, and curled his lip as he noted the brute expression, the square head, and long ungainly arms. Then he made for the door, which he had left open. But now it was closed, and he saw that it was provided with a self-closing apparatus. He touched the handle, and the unexpected happened. Something seemed to kick him in the pit of the stomach.

He went careering across the room, suffering from a tremendous electric shock. At the same moment the lights came on, and a bell began to ring—loudly.

The Tiger awoke immediately and sat up. He saw the livid mask of his hated enemy, and his hand went under his pillow. The Reckoner knew what that meant. He sprang at the Tiger and clutched him by the throat, wresting the lethal weapon from him.

“Cut off that current!” he ordered.

The Tiger grasped his aching throat, and leered.

“It can’t be cut off—until the door is opened from the outside. At last I’ve got you—like a rat in a trap. The servants have instructions to call the police when that bell rings. I don’t think they can fail to hear it, do you?”

The Reckoner ran to the window and gazed out. There was a drop of sixty feet to the ground beneath—into a stone-flagged basement area. Escape that way was impossible. He swung round on the Tiger and presented the pistol at his chest.

“You will cut off that current or——!”

“I tell you it is impossible—from this side.” He grinned in his great delight. “You seem to have survived four hundred volts extremely well. Have another go at the handle. It killed a big St. Bernard dog, but, then, you are a dog of another order. So you came to get me, eh?”



"Why shouldn't I get you while I've got the chance? It would save the police a lot of hard work."

The Tiger flinched under the fierce gaze of the dark eyes, but he was no coward; moreover, he believed he held all the trump cards.

"Go on, then," he growled.

The Reckoner pricked up his ears. There were noises below. Evidently the servants were up—and calling the police. Every second was precious now. He moved to the door.

"Smash it!" sneered the Tiger. "But I ought to inform you it is steel-lined. My own invention this. Rather good, eh?"

Then something happened, totally outside his imagination. The Reckoner, with his back towards the Tiger, tore off the painted mask, held it in his right hand, and gripped the brass door-knob. There was no shock, for the mask was made of rubber. The Tiger cursed as the door opened and slammed again. The Reckoner had gone!

The scared servants scuttled before the awful apparition that swept down the stairs, for the mask had been roughly replaced and lent the wearer a fearful expression. Through the hall he went, into the library, and out of the window. A few minutes later he was lost in the misty night.

IN accordance with the law, Blackham had appeared before a magistrate, was remanded, and immediately after sent to France to await his trial. It was a time of great suffering for Ann, for, despite her belief in her father's innocence, she knew the evidence against him was weighty.

"How long will it be before—before they try him?" she asked Reynolds.

"I don't know. It depends upon so many things."

"And to think that the Reckoner betrayed him!" she said bitterly. "I hate him now. But why—why did he do it? My father believes something horrid, but I can't believe it."

"What?"

"Don't ask me. It is all wrong. Things are all mixed. There was something else too. I ought to have told you before, but I have been too distressed. My father told me that the Reckoner had a grudge against you—that you were in danger."

"I don't think so."

"But my father was so sure. He said the Reckoner—would get you."

"Don't worry about me, Ann. Now, what you need is a holiday. This business is getting on your mind. Why not take a week off and get down to the seaside?"

"Oh, no. It wouldn't help. I would rather stay here."

And stay she did, striving her utmost to keep a stiff lip. It was noticeable now that the police left her alone. Having got Blackham, Brent was temporarily satisfied. True, the Reckoner was still at large, but he had small hope that Ann could help him in that respect. When next he saw her he was decent enough to express his regret.

"It had to come," he said. "Probably you dislike me, but, after all, I have my duty to do."

"I—understand."

"Shall you go to the trial?"

"No. I couldn't bear it. And I shouldn't be of any use, should I?"

"I'm afraid not. It's a pity you can't hit back on the man who gave your father away. He's not worth much consideration."

"I know that now. If—if I could pay him back I think I would. There is something I wish to tell you. My father told me that Mr. Reynolds is a marked man. Do you think——?"

"It is true."

"But why? What has he done?"

"That is a question for the Reckoner. Reynolds thinks it is bluff, but he may find himself grievously mistaken."

Ann blanched at his grim expression. All her preconceptions were being knocked end-wise. The Reckoner was proving himself to be a cheat and a

traitor. He was wanted for murder—and her former conviction of his innocence was now by no means as strong. But she paid no heed to her father's warnings regarding herself. Her old timidity had gone for ever.

Rose Harmer, deeply hurt by Reynolds's failure to keep his appointment, had satisfied herself by writing him a crisp letter. But it was inevitable that they should meet soon, and, when they did, Reynolds found her frigid and scornful.

"I got your letter, Rose," he said. "I didn't reply, because I wanted to tell you personally how dreadfully sorry I am. Something happened that morning which knocked every other consideration clean out of my mind."

"Indeed! Something connected with Ann, no doubt?"

"Yes. Her father was arrested the previous night. She had to go to Scotland Yard——"

"*Had* to go!"

"Well, she wished to go."

"And then, of course, *you* had to go?"

"It was the least I could do. The poor girl was very distraught."

"Yes, she would be."

"Is that the fullest extent of your sympathy?"

Rose glared at him.

"Sympathy! Where is the need for sympathy? The man is a murderer, and his daughter—well——!"

There was something in the hiatus that stung Reynolds to the quick. Rose knew how to do that sort of thing excellently. The innuendo was followed by a short laugh and a shrug of her shoulders.

"So you think Ann inherits a lot of vices?"

"I am a strong believer in heredity."

"That is a very bold statement," he said, gazing at her seriously.

She got his meaning instantly. It was a subtle allusion to her own father.

"You are not usually so insulting," she said icily.

"Nor you so needlessly cruel. Rose, consider that girl's feelings."

"I don't wish to—thank you! All I know is that she has but to raise her little finger and you are led by the nose. And I tell you frankly, Harry, that as long as she is in your house I shall stay away from it. It isn't decent."

It was not often she succeeded in arousing his anger, for his emotions were well controlled, but the scorn with which she made the remark, the contumelious curl of her lip, grated upon his nerves.

"You can be merciless at times," he retorted. "And you take a delight in humbugging yourself, for you know as well as I do that Ann is as straight and honest as any girl could possibly be. She comes here to work—and for no other reason. And she will continue to come here while she gives satisfaction."



"Are you seeking to make friendship between us impossible?"

"Why should it be?"

"Your conduct is most reprehensible."

"I am sorry you think that."

She left in high dudgeon, and Reynolds sighed as he uncovered a half-finished canvas and resumed work on it. Ann came back from lunch to find him sitting looking vacantly at the painting. On a table near by was a tray containing sandwiches and tea, left there by Tony. But the frugal meal was untouched.

"Haven't you had your lunch?" she enquired.

"Lunch? Oh, no. I don't feel like it."

"But you must. Shall I pour out some tea?"

"No, thanks. I had a sudden urge to paint. But somehow—somehow I can't concentrate."

"It is you who need a holiday, not me," she said with a smile. "Why not——?"

He shook his head, and put the palette and brushes aside.

"Relaxation perhaps. Ann, we are both growing morbidly philosophical. That book, I suppose. Let us go somewhere to-night. It will do us good."

"Go somewhere?"

"Yes—some dinner, and then a show. There's opera somewhere in town. Haven't heard any good music for months. What do you say?"

Ann reflected for a few seconds and then consented. Had he made that proposal a month ago,

she would have declined, but of late he had got into her life to such an extent that his company was the most cherished thing in the world.

"Shall I have to dress?" she asked. "I—I haven't anything fit to wear."

"Nor have I. Don't worry about it. We'll be Bohemians. We won't even wash."

She laughed, and began to look forward to the excursion. At seven o'clock they dined in a little restaurant in Soho, and Ann, despite her apologies about lack of raiment, looked entrancingly attractive. To-night her eyes were brighter than they had been for many days, and she set herself to forget for one brief evening the plight of her father. Unable to get stall seats, Reynolds had been compelled to take a box.

"You're fond of music?" she asked.

"Yes. Life would be a sordid thing without music, poetry, and art. Take those from us, and what is left?"

"There is love."

"That is a sort of poetry, too."

The opera was *Madame Butterfly*, every note of which Reynolds knew by heart, but Ann had never seen it—nor any other opera. To her it was the discovery of a new world. The exquisite music drove every other consideration from her mind, and the sad story made a great impression upon her. Reynolds could see her face, mysteriously illumined by the half-lights. There was even more interest

for him there than on the stage. . . . They were sitting very close together in the rather confined space, his head almost touching hers. By some chance their hands touched—and stayed in contact.

When the curtain came down on the final scene, their hands had become linked. For a second or two they looked at each other in the blazing lights—a look which conveyed more than mere words could express. Slowly he went for her coat, and held it up for her. They left the theatre in silence, and he called a taxi.

“Well, Ann, did you enjoy it?”

“It—it was wonderful!”

“Yes—good stuff.”

That was all. Ann reached home with her heart in a flutter. That look he had given her—the gentle touch of his hands! She would have been blind not to have known that this was not mere sympathy. Yet there had been no developments. Perhaps—perhaps he was ashamed to have displayed that emotion! She could even forgive him that—in the circumstances. Only one thing she knew—knew it with a certitude that nothing could alter. She had found love, and it was reciprocated! Sleep was out of the question. All through the night the love duet from the opera echoed through her mind. It was wonderful, yet, somehow, painful.

On the following morning the excellent Tony

received a shock. Reynolds had told him not to wait up for him on the preceding night, and Tony, who was tremendously fond of his bed, had retired at eleven o'clock. In the mornings it was his custom to turn on the bath at seven-thirty and then wake his master and take him a cup of tea. Punctual to the minute, Tony knocked on the bedroom door and entered. To his amazement, Reynolds was not there—nor had the bed been slept in. Tony put down the tray and rubbed his eyes.

"Lumme!" he muttered. "If that ain't the bloomin' limit!"

He went downstairs to see if any note had been left there which might explain the phenomenon, but there was nothing. A further investigation revealed the fact that Reynolds had, apparently, not been home since he left the place at half-past six on the preceding evening.

Anxiously Tony waited on a telegram or telephone message, for Reynolds usually notified him of any intention to spend the night away from home. At ten o'clock Ann turned up. Tony's face gave him away.

"Is anything the matter, Tony?" she asked.

"The guv'nor is not here. Went out at half-past six yesterday evening and never came home."

Ann's heart gave a great bound. She had left Reynolds at close upon midnight, within half a mile of his own house. Horrible fears entered her

mind as she recalled her father's warning, and a few minutes later she was telephoning Brent. He called in person.

"So Mr. Reynolds has—disappeared?"

"He did not come home last night—and Tony expected him."

"There has been no message?"

"None."

He nodded his head rather grimly, and interviewed Tony. Tony admitted that his master had been away from home on several occasions, but never without telling him beforehand.

"It is a little premature to draw any conclusions," said Brent. "I will make a few enquiries in certain quarters. In the meantime, if you hear from him let me know."

But night came, and not a word was heard. Ann stayed on at the studio, with apprehension increasing every minute. Tony was like a dog with the distemper, but had no theories of any kind. The night passed, and Ann came again in the morning, to find Tony with a long face.

"He—he hasn't come back?"

"No."

"Then—then it must be——!"

"What?"

"There is someone who bears him ill-feeling. You must get on the telephone to Inspector Brent. No—no. I will do it myself."



THE news was brought to Rose Harmer that afternoon by Brent himself, and she received it with a gasp of horror. It was so long since the warning had been sent that she had begun to doubt that the threat would ever be put into execution.

“How long—has he been missing?” she asked in a strained voice.

“Two days.”

“But you did not tell me!”

“I wanted to be sure that there were real grounds for suspicion.”

“And now you believe——?”

“The long hand of the Reckoner has fallen. What other solution is there?”

“It’s—terrible! Oh, why wouldn’t Harry take heed? He laughed at that note. What was he doing on that evening?”

“He went out to dine, and then to a theatre—with a friend.”

“Who?”

“Ann Blackham.”

Rose’s mouth tightened. She saw it all now. Ann had lured him to a spot favourable for the crime—or abduction. Crammed full of prejudice, preconceptions, and jealousy, it was the simplest matter in the world to build up a theory. But Brent shook his head.

"She had nothing to do with it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I have questioned her closely, and under that ordeal she divulged the truth. She loves him."

Rose laughed scornfully.

"Love! A girl from the gutter! And you—you were taken in by such a story?"

"There was no story. She did not tell me that, but a fool would have known it."

"I don't believe it. Look at her record. Consider her father—her proved association with the Reckoner. Does any decent girl associate with murderers?"

"She did not know the Reckoner was a murderer, and it has yet to be proved."

"Great heavens! Are you too becoming sentimental through his latest exploits? Wasn't Sir Henry Lush shot?"

"Certainly. But in that connection a rather curious thing has happened. A set of finger-prints was sent me, along with a note which suggested that it might be worth my while comparing them with the fingerprints of a certain wanted man."

"Well?"

"They were identical with the fingerprints which we found on the tree in these grounds. Before I could get my breath the telephone rang. The caller was the man who sent the fingerprints. He

wanted to know the result of comparison. I did not commit myself, but expressed a desire to see him. He said he had no desire to see me, but that he wished to help the cause of justice, which he could not do unless I gave him a plain yea or nay. I ultimately told him that the fingerprints were those of a man suspected of perpetrating a crime. At that, to my annoyance, he rang off."

"But what does that prove?"

"Nothing. But the fact that an anonymous person managed to get a fine set of fingerprints gives me cause for reflection—when the fingerprints are those of a man who, we have every cause to believe, shot Sir Henry Lush."

"But it still might be the Reckoner!"

"Yes, but the argument is against it. I cannot imagine the Reckoner affording any man the opportunity to take the impressions of his fingertips. He is far too clever."

"Clever or not, he left them on the tree."

"It was just that fact that has always caused a little doubt to linger in my mind. Everything the Reckoner attempts is a finished job. Nothing of the clumsy crook about him. I cannot imagine him handling anything in the nature of a lethal weapon, or anything which might be used as an exhibit, with his naked hands."

Rose waved her hands impatiently. They seemed to have got off the original subject.

"Murderer or not, he is a desperate scoundrel,"

she said. "And that girl is covering him. She ought to be arrested and made to tell the truth."

"It is a very simple matter to arrest people, but a more difficult business wringing information from them—in this case an impossible matter. Whatever that girl is—or may have been—she loves Harry. One can read it in her face—her eyes——"

"So you have had time for that?" she cut in coldly.

"It is my business to draw what deductions I can from people's behaviour and expressions."

"And what are you going to do about Harry?"

"Get the assistance of the Press. I have secured a good photograph of Harry, and copies are being made. They may help."

"You think—he is alive?"

Brent shrugged his shoulders.

. . . . .

Ann saw the announcements in the Press—photographs of the man she loved labelled "missing." There were brief accounts of his career, his place in the world of art, and some nicely phrased compliments. A theory of lapse of memory was advanced, but Ann was utterly unable to accept that. At the back of her mind the Reckoner was now a horrible, sinister figure. All her former admiration had gone. It was even possible that he had advised her going to Reynolds in the hope that he might, in conversation with her father, obtain

information that would aid him in his fell business.

Yet, opposed to this very natural hate was the fact that he had come to her aid when she had needed him. It was the recollection of the Paris episode that had prevented her from telling Brent about the bungalow on the South Downs where the Reckoner had gone after that adventure. She decided to go there, in the rather faint hope of learning something.

It was but an hour's run from London, and she had no difficulty in finding the bungalow. The door was locked, but there was a window at the side which was fastened with a very primitive lock. Feeling much like a thief, she tinkered with this, and ultimately forced it. With quaking heart, but fixed determination, she entered the place. It was quite well furnished, and the small sitting-room contained a bureau. But not a single letter could she find, and there was dust over everything, as if no person had been there for a long time.

A chest of drawers in the bedroom contained articles of clothing, and in the back corner of the lowest drawer she laid hold of something which caused her to utter a little cry. It was a mask fashioned in thin rubber, and delicately painted. Even in its flabby state it seemed to be grinning at her. She put it away quickly, and left the place.

Arrived in London, a second idea entered her head. On one occasion at least the old house near Wapping had been used to secrete some person. She remembered the queer noises from the basement,



access to which was forbidden her. It might be possible that the Reckoner possessed a key to the house, and was using it as he had used it before. Despite the fact that it was growing dark, and that she was nervous of entering the house alone, she made for Wapping.

She hesitated for a few minutes before entering the place, but at last she summoned the necessary courage and stepped into the hall. It was terribly damp inside, and so charged with mystery that she experienced the desire to get out as quickly as possible. Switching on the lights, she passed into the big sitting-room. Nothing was disturbed there. Now came the great ordeal—the basement. She went down the stone steps gingerly, passed through two big chambers, and ultimately reached the old wine-cellar. The stout door of this was furnished with a comparatively new padlock. No wine had ever been stored there since her father's occupation of the house, and to keep it locked up seemed quite needless, unless——!

She banged on the door with her fist, and was startled to hear a sound from within. It was low and long—and scarcely human. Followed a long silence, and again she knocked. The queer noise came again—a trifle louder.

“Mr. Reynolds!”

She received no intelligible reply, but at intervals came the groaning. The prisoner—whoever he was—was gagged, and suffering intensely. She

believed it was Reynolds. What to do next was the problem. She decided to get on to the police, and went upstairs to the telephone. But she discovered that the telephone was now disconnected.

The obvious alternative was to break the padlock, and she searched for a tool that would accomplish this. In an old box she found a miscellaneous collection of tools, among which were a file and a hacksaw. She chose the latter, and carried it to the basement. The well-tempered saw made short work of the padlock. In five minutes it was free of the staple, and the door came open.

There was an electric-light switch inside the stone vault. She pressed it, and stared fixedly at what the strong illumination revealed. Lying on the floor near a packet of food and a jug of beer, was a bound figure. He had evidently rolled from the truckle bed in the corner in a frantic endeavour to reach the food which he needed. His face was now turned to the ground, and he seemed to be incapable of moving.

“Mr. Reynolds—is it——?”

A low groan sent her moving towards him. She turned the body over and gazed on a villainous face, with its mouth tightly gagged. It was not Reynolds, but a man she had never seen before. The bleared eyes blinked at her. Compassion took the place of fear, and she unfastened the scarf which kept the gag in place.

“Water !”

She carried the jug of stale beer to him, and helped him take a drink.

“Who—who are you ?” she asked.

“I—I was brought here—starved—— For God’s sake untie this rope. The knots—are at the back.”

She did not like the look of him, and hesitated for a moment, but then she reflected that he was weak and comparatively harmless. In two minutes he was free, and dragging himself on to the bed, where he sat and rubbed his limbs.

“Food—there ! I’m starving.”

The packet on the floor contained sandwiches—now very stale, but Jukes ate them like a wolf.

“Who sent you here ?” he asked.

“No one. I live here—at least——”

“Then you—you are Ann Blackham ?”

“Yes. I—I came here in the hope of finding someone—someone who is missing—and found you instead. How did you know my name ?”

“Never mind,” he mumbled, and then fixed her with his eyes. “Do you know who put me here, and left me to starve ?”

“No. I know—nothing.”

“It was that devil they call the Reckoner. By God, I’ll get him if I have to—— !”

She retreated before the string of foul oaths that followed, and began to wonder whether she had acted wisely in freeing him, for he looked the incarnation of devilry.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home. I don't live here now."

He lurched towards her, but she ran on ahead of him, and waited outside the gate. He blundered past her, and disappeared. Ann waited a few minutes, and then crept back to the house and locked the front door. Her heart fell as she reflected that her day had been wasted. All she had done was to release that murderous-looking character, who had not even deigned to thank her for his freedom.

*THE SPLENDID CRIME**XXVI*

IN the meantime, things had not gone too well with the Reckoner. On his list of marked men two new names figured. They were Timothy Bright and Rogers. That one of these two had squealed on Blackham there was no doubt, but which one he had yet to ascertain.

He ran Bright to earth at close upon one o'clock in the morning, in a gambling-den in Stepney. Bright was hauled along a passage, with the hard point of an automatic pistol in the small of his back, and projected into an empty room. He picked himself up, and shrank before the dominating figure of his captor.

"What you want with me?" he stammered.

"I want the truth. You went to the Tiger with information that was worth something. How much did he pay you?"

"The Tiger? Oh, 'im! It ain't true. I've never had no dealings with that feller."

"You knew where Blackham was hiding?"

"Yes. I went there with him, but he wouldn't let me stay. I didn't give 'im away. Why should I? He treated me fair, he did."

The Reckoner made sure that the door was locked and then advanced on Bright, with the pistol levelled at him.

"There is only one punishment for treachery," he said. "Yes, you were treated fairly, but you could not resist the Tiger's gold. Now you are going to——"

"Wait!" Bright almost screamed. "It wasn't me—it was Rogers. Arter that business with the cops he was clean scared. Told me he wasn't having any more to do with you nor Blackham. I saw him two days later with the Tiger, and then some money came to him. He got drunk in this place—treated everyone. I took him home, 'cause he couldn't walk."

"Did he say anything—about Blackham?"

"No. But he said the Tiger was straight. He could trust the Tiger."

"And you took him home?"

"In a taxi—he paid. Had a pocket full of notes."

"Where did you take him?"

Bright hesitated, but a jab with the pistol loosened his tongue again.



“Colney Street, Stepney—No. 103.”

“That is the truth?”

“Yes. Honour bright. I ain’t the sort to squeal on a pal, but he didn’t play fair with Blackham. Don’t see why I should worry about ’im.”

The Reckoner nodded, and went out without another word. As he was emerging on to the street, a man apparently on his way to the gaming-house, barged into him. The light of the street lamp fell on his face. It was Rogers. He took one look at the Reckoner, gasped, and then turned on his heels and ran. The Reckoner went after him with long, lithe strides. Down deserted streets and alleys the chase went on, Rogers having the advantage of local knowledge. But he failed to shake off his pursuer.

Ultimately Rogers came out by the river, in the neighbourhood of docks and wharfs. He gulped and turned his head. Round the corner came the relentless pursuer—a tall, silhouetted form that seemed bigger than ever in the gloom. Rogers was winded—incapable of further flight. He scuttled down an alley, making for an old warehouse to which he possessed a key—a place rented by the Tiger for the storage of certain commodities. Rogers had recently been promoted to the job of warehouseman.

While he was fumbling with the lock, the Reckoner came down on him. He turned the key ere

the long arm reached him, and tried to slam the door. Failing in this, he blundered through the darkness. At the end of the big chamber was another door leading into a walled yard. Frantically he opened this—and then an idea came to him. Instead of going through the doorway, he slipped behind a big packing-case, leaving the door slightly ajar. Immediately a ray of bright light smote through the darkness, and, after making a sweep of the room, shone on the doorway.

The Reckoner came forward, torch in one hand and pistol in another. Warily he pushed the door open and flashed the light through it. Rogers saw his chance, and took it. With commendable agility he rose to his feet and projected the hesitant man through the doorway. The door slammed to, and a big bolt was pushed home. With a cackle of joy the triumphant man found a switch and illuminated the warehouse. Despite the stoutness of the door and the bolt, Rogers took no chances. Perspiring freely, he dragged heavy packing-cases forward and barricaded the door. Then, immensely pleased with his work, he went out to apprise the Tiger of his lucky capture.

. . . . .

Anton Dubois was sleeping the sleep of the unjust when the household was awakened by the repeated ringing of the hall bell. Later came a knocking on his door, and his butler entered to inform him that

a Mr. Rogers had called and wished to see him at once.

"Is he drunk, coming here this time of the night?" snarled the Tiger.

"He said, sir, it was most important."

"Then show him up here. Curse the fellow!"

Rogers sneaked into the room, hat clasped nervously in his hand. The Tiger regarded him with a contemptuous leer from over the top of a thick eiderdown.

"What the hell do you mean waking up the whole neighbourhood like this?"

"I—I've got him."

"Got who?"

"The Reckoner."

The Tiger now sat bolt upright, scarcely believing his ears.

"Are you a sleep-walker?" he demanded.

"I'm—dead awake. Met him at Southgate's, and he came after me. Someone must have blabbed about what I told you. He looked—mighty rattled with me. I—I had no gun with me, and he had. I had to run."

"Yes, you would."

"At the wharf he was close on my heels. I slipped into the warehouse, and there—there I trapped him."

"You mean you have got the Reckoner under lock and key?"

"I have that. You remember that kind of

courtyard—walls all round—twenty feet high, where we keep the empty cases? He's there. I slammed the door on him and piled a ton of stuff against it. He's as safe as a rat in a trap."

"Are there any cases in that yard now?"

"No. Unless he's a blooming fly he can't get over that wall. Hadn't you—hadn't you better come along?"

The Tiger nodded his head and got out of bed. He even forgave the interrupter of his beloved sleep—provided he wasn't demented or lying. It was never too late for serious business, and this was a matter of the utmost seriousness. For months he had pined to lay his hands on the Reckoner, and now, when all his schemes to achieve that had failed, this half-baked creature had succeeded. It was marvellous!

The chauffeur was told to get the car out, but the Tiger did not require his services. His staff was a most respectable one, and more or less ignorant of the Tiger's adventurous life. He drove the big Daimler himself, and reached the wharf in record time, for the streets of London were deserted.

"Lord! I hope he hasn't gone!" muttered Rogers as they entered the warehouse.

"If he has, I'll teach you a lesson."

They came upon the scene of the *coup*, and the Tiger gazed on the huge pile of packing-cases approvingly. It would have taken an elephant to move them.

"He's—in there," whispered Rogers, pointing to the door.

"I'd like to have a look at him."

"He's armed."

"Well, we'll try a little diplomacy," he whispered.

He went to the door and knocked on it with his stick, but no sound came from the other side.

"Hello there!" he shouted.

Still there was no response. The Tiger compressed his lips and swung round on Rogers. Rogers put his finger to his lips, and lured the Tiger farther away from the door.

"Shamming," he whispered. "We can easily see if he's there, by going upstairs and looking down into the yard. I've got a good electric torch in the office."

"Good! Get it!"

Armed with the torch, they mounted the stairs and arrived in a similar room to the one below. Rogers went to the left end of it and opened a window. It looked directly upon the yard, and even in the darkness a vague form could be seen, crouching by the bolted door. The Tiger pushed his head through the opening and suddenly flashed the torch. It fell clean upon the Reckoner, illuminating vividly the mask that was now turned upwards.

"Good!" chuckled the Tiger. "A fine bit of work, Rogers. Good walls those—twenty feet at least."



The mask was still facing the Tiger. He snapped his fingers at the wearer.

"Now I've got you where I want you, you scab! Just try to get out of this mess—if you can."

The Reckoner's voice came back—clear and calm.

"I'm surprised to find you up so late, Anton. Better go home before you catch cold."

"It isn't cold you'll be catching," snarled the Tiger. "It is something decidedly—hot."

"Well, get busy!"

"I will—when it suits me. I mean to hand you over to the police—when you tell me what you have done with Jukes. Until then you can stay there and rot."

"Jukes? Oh, yes, I remember. He is quite safe—and well cared for, although I will admit his rations are somewhat irregular—and must continue to be so while I am unable to attend to him."

"Where is he?"

"Ah, that is quite a deep secret."

"Cheeky, aren't you?" sneered the Tiger. "Well, we will see how far it carries you."

With that he slammed down the window, and went downstairs with Rogers.

"You'll have to stay here," he said. "I can't take any risks with that fellow. Here's a gun. Keep guard over that door. I'll have you relieved early to-morrow morning."

Rogers did not view with any pleasure the long,

cold vigil ; nor was he quite sure about the Reckoner. He looked upon that individual as the devil incarnate—a man who always kept a good card up his sleeve. But there was no arguing with the Tiger. He nodded his head and accepted the pistol.

On the other side of the door, the Reckoner was cudgelling his brains to find a way out of this tight trap. On one side and at the end were walls at least twenty feet high, with spikes on the top, and on the other side was the main wall of the warehouse, with no window below that which the Tiger had looked through. In a corner were a few loose boards and some packing waste. His only safeguard was the pistol, but against that the Tiger could use the potent weapon of starvation.

He reproved himself for ever getting into this plight, and it was all the more ignominious to reflect that a man of Rogers's mental calibre should have been the means of putting him there. Evidently the Tiger was concerned about the welfare of Jukes, not from any feeling of humanitarianism, but because Jukes was cognisant of certain facts concerning the death of Sir Henry Lush.

During the night it rained hard. The Reckoner placed a few boards against the wall and made a sort of cubby-hole which sheltered him to some extent. But the cold was penetrating. He saw the dawn break, and heard voices from without. But there was no attempt made to open the door.

Later in the day came the Tiger. He carried on another conversation from the window above—or, rather, a complete monologue, for the Reckoner was in no mood to reply.

Another dreadful night passed, and the intense cold ate into the prisoner's vitals. He possessed a pocket-knife, and with this he attempted to loosen some bricks in the wall, but with no success. It was towards morning that a better idea came to him. There were ten loaded cartridges in the pistol, and a further twenty in his pocket. Among the rubbish was some cardboard and string. With the penknife he commenced to make a hole in the door-jamb close to the place where he judged the bolt was fixed. It was slow work, and hours passed.

Ultimately, when he was near to dropping, a deep hole was made. He then unloaded all his cartridges and collected the gunpowder. The whole of this, save one small portion, was plugged tightly into the hole. A piece of string was unravelled, and some wetted gunpowder was smeared on it, transforming it into a quite good fuse. The end of this he placed in the hole, and then proceeded to block the entrance with bits of stone, bullets, anything that would make it tight. The job was finished off by driving nails into the wood and bending the ends of them across the stopping. The sound of the hammering caused a commotion on the other side of the door, and he realised to his disappointment that at least two persons were

there. Then he heard the Tiger's unmistakable voice.

"Jukes ! By Gosh, where did you spring from ?"

The Reckoner bit his lip. His brain-wave seemed to have occurred too late. By some means Jukes had got free. It meant that at least three men opposed him. The end of the fuze was sticking out of his miniature mine, asking to be lit, but the time was not yet ripe. In any case there was just a doubt whether it would serve its purpose. The exposure, and lack of food, were telling upon him. He suddenly experienced a wave of faintness, and staggered away from the door to lean heavily against the blank wall.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXVII

JUKES sat on the end of a packing-case, facing the Tiger. He had called at the Tiger's house, and was told by Siki, who was working on the stolen document, that Anton had gone to the warehouse. *En route*, Jukes had had many drinks, and was in a dangerous mood.

"What happened to you ?" asked the Tiger.

"The Reckoner got me. Locked me up in a house near Wapping—Blackham's house. I nearly croaked. Then the girl came—Ann. She released me. I went straight to your place, and Siki told me to come here."

"Why did the Reckoner get you?"

"God knows!"

The Tiger projected his head forward.

"I know. He tried to get information from you."

"So he did, but I told him nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"You bet your life. My God, if ever I get my hands on him I'll teach him——"

The Tiger's low laugh caused him to stop.

"What's the game?"

"Do you know who is behind that door?"

"No. Gosh, you don't mean——?"

"The Reckoner. He tried to get Rogers, but Rogers got him instead."

Rogers nodded his head, and Jukes gaped.

"Well, I'm——! What are you going to do with him?"

"We haven't got him yet. He's armed, and we have no means of disarming him until he faints from lack of food and drink."

"Then call up Brent. Brent would be tickled to death to lay hands on him. Let the cops have some of the fun."

The Tiger closed one eye knowingly, and then compressed his lips and shook his head.

"It is my business to learn how certain cases are developing up there at the Yard. Do you know what Brent has discovered?"

"What?"



The Tiger lowered his voice.

"You fool! You left fingerprints on a tree in the grounds where you did that job. Brent found them on a patch of gum, and there's one man alive who knows whose fingerprints they are. He is in there."

He pointed dramatically to the door, and Jukes stared at him in amazement. The Tiger suddenly put out an arm and seized Jukes's left hand. One look at the black fingers was sufficient.

"I thought so! That was why he got you. Look at that! Ink!"

Jukes's face went pallid as for the first time he realised how he had come by those stains. In his craving for food and his subsequent escape he had overlooked that significant fact.

"Has—has he squealed?" he asked.

"I think not—so far."

"Then how does he know?"

"He didn't know, but he guessed; and he sent the prints, or a copy of them, to Brent, and was reassured. You fool, to leave traces behind you! There was some chewing-gum, too, on the ground. The Reckoner found that. He knows everything."

Jukes's brows became wet with perspiration. Now he saw why the Reckoner could not be handed over to the police. He possessed this incriminating knowledge. He held the life of Jukes in his hands.

"There's only one way," he said hoarsely.

"There you show signs of intelligence. Take this!"

Rogers, who had never been implicated in murder, shook like a jelly as Jukes took the pistol from the Tiger.

"You—you ain't ——?" he gasped.

The Tiger turned on him ferociously, and Rogers cringed.

"Get those cases away from the door. We'll have him out in a few minutes—and he'll be harmless."

Rogers commenced to remove the heavy cases, while the Tiger gave Jukes instructions. The pair of conspirators then mounted the stairs and approached the window which afforded them an outlook into the yard.

"He's there," whispered the Tiger. "When you're ready, I'll put the light on him. Close the window a bit. It will help to muffle the sound."

The Reckoner was recovering from his attack of faintness. He went to the door and listened intently. Now and again he heard a word or two, but nothing coherent. Then came a sound, as if boxes were being dragged about, and he wondered if an attempt were being made to take him by force. He rather regretted having unloaded all the cartridges.

A slight sound from his rear caused him to swing round. It was the window above him being

opened. He was on the opposite side of the yard, and it dawned upon him vaguely that he was a fine target for any marksman such as Jukes. He made to dive to the other side, when a blinding ray of light fell on his face.

“Now!”

A tongue of flame broke from the neighbourhood of the window, and something like a white-hot brand seemed to pierce his shoulder. Behind the flash he caught a glimpse of two faces, and then staggered and fell. But in a moment he was up again. It was neck or nothing now. To stay inactive meant death. With trembling fingers he lighted a match as he leapt towards the door. It went out as it touched the end of the fuse, but it had done its work. The string burnt quickly. He tottered to the other side of the door, and in a second a deep, reverberating report broke upon his ears. There was a cloud of smoke and a splintering of wood. Gasping, he saw the door ajar, with the lock-side of it shattered. Picking up a stout piece of wood, he put his weight on the door and slipped through the opening. Immediately before him was Rogers, looking completely dumbfounded. At the sight of the livid mask his hand went to his pocket, but the Reckoner found his cranium with the piece of timber, and Rogers fell among the crates.

There was no time to search for Rogers's weapon, for from overhead came the sound of running feet.

The Reckoner, fighting against collapse, ran unsteadily towards the exit, and emerged on the wharf. Dazed and weak, he staggered towards a more frequented quarter. He thought he was going blind, for strange lights flickered before his eyes. Missing the right turning, he came out into a quiet street, and grabbed at the railings of a house to support himself. Attached to them was a brass plate—Albert Young, M.D. He groped his way to the gate, took the mask from his face and, mounting the few steps, rang the bell.

When the maid opened the door, she found a man leaning heavily against the wall, with his coat smeared with blood. He tried to smile at her, but made a horrible grimace.

“Lawks !” she ejaculated.

“It’s—all right—an accident,” he gasped. “Is—is the doctor at home ?”

. . . . .

The Tiger and Jukes returned to the warehouse after a fruitless pursuit of the vanished man. Rogers was still holding his head and groaning.

“Stop that noise, you idiot !” snarled the Tiger. “You—you let him go ! God, I could strangle you !”

“I was knocked backwards by the explosion,” complained Rogers. “How was I to know—— ?”

“Shut up !”

Jukes was staring at the broken door. He had

not even curiosity enough to want to solve the mystery of the explosion. What stared him in the face was the gallows.

"I've got to get out of this," he muttered. "He's got me—got me fixed."

"And where do you think you'll run to?"

"Anywhere. I'm not wasting any time either."

"Change your lodgings by all means, but don't try to get out of the country—yet. If the Reckoner squeals, all the ports will be watched. When the time comes I'll get you away."

"How?"

"That is my business. I have to meet a man in ten days' time. When that is done, we'll leave London alone for a bit. But I'd give five years of my life to settle accounts with the Reckoner before I go."

"Better leave him alone," said Jukes. "He has caused us enough trouble already. What am I to do now?"

"Go home, and clear out at once."

"Guess I will."

"And me?" put in Rogers.

"You can go to hell. It is all through you that we lost him just now. But, if you value your neck, keep out of the Reckoner's way."

The trio split up, and the Tiger went back to his house. He was in a vile temper at what had transpired, and a little nervous as to what the Reckoner might do next. In the library, Siki was



at work. He was a wizened little Japanese, and a master of cipher. But the document which he had before him was giving him many anxious moments. It was the trickiest thing he had ever handled, and it consistently baffled him. As the Tiger entered, Siki raised his almond eyes.

"Well, how does it go?"

"Not make much headway. Siki think it is a new code—never meet him before."

"Haven't you any idea what it is about?"

"None."

"But Samoviev must know. I might wring more money from him if I knew the exact value of the thing. As it is, he is prepared to pay quite a good sum—without a translation."

"Maybe he have the key?"

"He must have, unless he bargains on laying his hands on someone better qualified than you."

Siki shrugged his shoulders, resenting the remark, for he had accomplished many difficult tasks of decoding for various personages and governments.

"You know Samoviev?" he asked.

"By name and through correspondence. He may experience some difficulty in getting here, for he is suspect by the Foreign Office. I hope he doesn't fail."

Siki shook his head.

"He no fail. Velly dam clever."

"Anyway, I want that thing decoded. If you

don't make any progress in three days, I'll have to take it away and try in another quarter. Agitate the grey matter, my friend, or you may lose your little bonus."

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXVIII

ONE evening, when Tony was about to lock up the house for the night, a man left a taxi and walked rather unsteadily across the pavement to the handsome brass-knocker door. Tony was pushing home the bolt when a key rattled in the lock and the door was pushed open. A rather pallid face confronted Tony. He gasped from surprise and irrepressible joy.

"Mr. Reynolds ! "

"How do you do, Tony ? "

"But—— Ain't you well, sir ? You look——"

"Quite all right, Tony. Just a little—tired."

He staggered as he entered the house, and Tony caught him by the arm and led him into the studio, where he sat down heavily on the couch.

"What—what has happened, sir ? "

"Happened ? "

"I bin worried to death. The police—everyone thought something dreadful had happened to you."

Reynolds shook his head.

"I just went—I don't know where I went. It's no use asking me, Tony. I'm tired, and want to get to bed."

"Certainly, sir. Shall I prepare the bath?"

"Not—not to-night."

Tony's joy at seeing his master again was mitigated to some extent by the obvious fact of his illness. Reynolds had to take Tony's arm again before he could get to his room, but there he declined any further aid.

"A good sleep, Tony," he said with a smile.

"That's the best tonic."

"Hadn't I better ring up the police?"

"What for?"

"They have been hunting for you. Inspector Brent said the Reckoner had got you. I ought to tell him you have come back."

"Do, then. Now go."

On the morrow Reynolds kept to his bed, and when Brent called he was shown into the bedroom. His eyes fully expressed his eagerness for details.

"A surprise, this. We had got beyond the anxious stage."

"You thought something had happened to me?"

"Well, hasn't it?"

"In a way, but not quite what you imagine. I'm perfectly all right. Just a lapse of memory."

"What!"

"It's happening every day, my dear Brent. Bang goes the memory—suddenly, and you are another person. Sorry if you have been wasting valuable time over me."

Brent's lips became compressed. That story did not go with him. He had heard it so often. Not one person in a hundred who put up that excuse was sincere. His disbelief was too marked to be overlooked.

"You doubt that?" asked Reynolds.

"To be honest—yes."

"Why?"

"Isn't it just what we were expecting? What good purpose does it serve to conceal facts?"

"And what are the facts?"

"The Reckoner carried out his threat. Loss of memory does not account for a pallid face—for all the signs of illness which you display. Come!"

"Well, that's the story."

"So you propose to say nothing?"

"What do you expect me to say?"

"It would assist the ends of justice if you would relate exactly what has happened to you since the night on which you were missing."

"But I am telling you. I suddenly lost my mem——"

"Rot!"

"Oh, well, we will leave it at that."

Brent bit his lip, and tapped the table impatiently with his finger, and then, realising that further questioning would be useless, he wished Reynolds a speedy recovery and took his departure. Half an hour later Tony came in to inform his master that Ann had called.

"I'll come down and see her. My dressing-gown—there!"

"Maybe it would be better if Miss Blackham came up?" suggested Tony.

"Don't be an ass! Tell her I will be down in a minute."

Tony shook his head doubtfully, and went to deliver the message.

"Is he—all right?" asked Ann anxiously.

"No, he ain't, Miss. Never seen him looking so thin about the gills. Just like a blooming ghost he is. I wanted to call in the doctor, but he wouldn't let me. Will you try to persuade him to see the doctor?"

She nodded, and walked up and down the studio in a state of great agitation. Then came Reynolds, trying to look perfectly calm and well.

"I'm ashamed that you should find me like this, Ann," he said. "It isn't often I indulge in excessive rest. Why—why do you look at me like that?"

"You're so pale and—— Oh, tell me what has happened to you! I have been so—so worried."

He sat on the couch beside her, and patted her hand.

"Don't worry about me, Ann. I have merely been investigating in a certain quarter."

"But—but wasn't it the Reckoner? My father said he meant to get you—for some unknown reason."

"It wasn't the Reckoner."



"You don't mean—you just went away and let people think that something had happened to you?"

"I don't think I can quite explain, Ann. Believe me, the Reckoner is powerless to harm me. But there are other enemies."

"Enemies!"

"Yours and mine. Shall I tell you something? It was not the Reckoner who betrayed your father to the police. It was a miserable rat named Rogers, who could not resist a big bribe."

Ann started at this.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"But how can you know that?"

"I made it my business to find out. At this moment your father is awaiting trial in France. He is quite innocent of the charge that has been brought against him. We are going to save him, Ann."

Her eyes grew quite bright at this, and then she shook her head doubtingly.

"I don't understand. He told me himself that the evidence against him was very black. How—how can he be saved?"

"You must trust me, Ann."

"I—I do," she said. "I think you are the only friend I have. If—if it could only be true!"

"You may hope for the best. And now I suppose you are anxious to start work again?"

"Yes—when you are well."

" Shall we say to-morrow ? "

She was about to agree, but shook her head after taking one look at him.

" You—you are ill," she said with emotion. " You are just pretending—pretending that everything is all right with you. You need a doctor."

" Nonsense ! "

" Oh, I'm not a child. There is much I do not understand—about you. But what I do know is that you are very ill. Won't you—won't you see a doctor—please, please, for my sake ? "

" What a stubborn girl you are ! Why are you so concerned about me ? "

" Why ? Aren't you—haven't we—— ? Oh, why do you ask such a question ? "

To his amazement, she drooped her head and uttered a choking cry. From the quivering shoulders he knew that she was weeping. He raised the dark head and gazed into the wet eyes.

" Ann ! "

" I—I can't help it. Please—please let me go ! "

She jumped up suddenly, but he rose too, and retained her hand. Under the burden of her unrestrained emotion she looked adorable. The desire to hold her in his arms, to kiss away the welling tears, was irresistible. His arms suddenly enclosed her, and she was drawn swiftly to him. A quick, passionate kiss, a cry of joy, and then a great pang of pain. Automatically his hand went to his breast, and he tottered sideways.

"It's all right—Ann," he muttered. "Just a twinge!"

She flew to him and caught his hand.

"You—you are hurt?"

"Yes—a little."

Her wet, reproving eyes were turned up to his.

"You did not tell me—the truth? You—you did not trust me. Just now you kissed me—a kiss without trust. Is that—is that all there was—in it?"

He was deeply shaken, and his breath was coming in great gasps. She realised it was no time for explanations, and rang the bell for Tony, who came in with a scared face.

"Mr. Reynolds needs you, Tony," she said. "Help him to his room, and then ring up the doctor."

"Ann!"

"It's no use. I won't listen to you. If Tony does not ring him up I will call him myself."

He smiled as he leaned on Tony.

"Very well—*noblesse oblige*. Ann, come and see me to-morrow. I—I may be able to dictate a little more of—of the great work. Cheerio!"

The doctor called later—his first visit for at least three years. He was a cheery individual, and stood and grinned at his patient for quite half a minute before he got to business.

"I had given you up as a hopeless case," he said. "It would be rather tragic if all my patients

persisted in keeping out of trouble for so long. What is wrong now ? ”

“ A slight accident.”

“ Hm ! What sort ? ”

“ A man with a pistol must have mistaken me for someone else. I got the dose—in my left shoulder. The matter seemed somewhat urgent, so I looked in on a stray doctor on my way home. He got the bullet out, and wanted to keep me, but his house was not so inviting as my own.”

The doctor laid bare the wound, and examined it thoroughly. It was bathed and a new dressing applied.

“ Nothing serious,” he said. “ But a nasty hole. So it was an accident ? ”

“ Oh, quite ! ”

“ Hm ! It will keep you in bed for a week.”

“ I can’t spare the time.”

“ You must. Did this happen during your loss of memory ? ”

“ So you read that ? ”

“ Yes. I read the papers occasionally.”

“ Bad habit,” said Reynolds. “ They don’t always tell the truth.”

From his expression the doctor gathered it would be indiscreet to pursue the subject, and like a wise man he held his tongue. When he had gone, Reynolds tried to compose himself for sleep, but the alluring form of Ann was far too vivid in his mind. He had kissed her, and held her in his arms

for a brief moment ! That experience was not easily forgotten. And she believed him to be just Harry Reynolds, a dreaming artist !

His coat was hanging on the door, close to his hand. He reached out and put his hand into a side-pocket. From it he withdrew a flimsy, painted mask—the mask of the Reckoner ! For some minutes he turned it over and over in his fingers, his mind ranging over the adventurous past. Then he laughed softly, and a little bitterly. His plan had not included love. No such idea had ever entered his mind. Rose—yes, he had thought a great deal about Rose, but never had she aroused the sort of passion that now stirred him to the very soul.

It was left to Ann to do that. He had taken compassion on her because of the big blot on her family scutcheon. He had never guessed that that sincere friendship would develop as it had done. From an environment of crime he had lifted her up, given her the chance which she had yearned for and now, like a thief in the night, he had stolen a kiss. In many respects his conscience was clean, but it gave him a pang of regret when he envisaged Ann.

Came dreams of possibilities—the conclusion of the work he had set himself to do ; the complete vanishment of the Reckoner from the world of men ; and then Ann—Ann and happiness ! He sighed, and put away the mask. No, it would not



do. Ann must be free to find happiness elsewhere. She had said she now hated the Reckoner. It must rest at that. He was going to pay the price for this masquerade—and it was going to be a long price !

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXIX

ROSE HARMER was not long in hearing the amazing news. Brent informed her of the wanderer's return, with a curious curl of his lip.

"Loss of memory," he added.

"Extraordinary !" ejaculated Harmer. "Harry never appeared to me as being that sort of person."

Rose was gazing into Brent's eyes.

"You don't believe that, Malcolm ?"

"I don't."

"He is hiding something ?"

"Yes. He has obviously suffered as Swinton suffered, but refuses to give me any details. What can one draw from that except the fact that Ann is involved ?"

"You think that Ann is closely connected with the Reckoner, and that his arrest would cause her to be embroiled ?"

"Something like that. We have known for a certainty that old Blackham was hand in glove with that scoundrel. There may be some blood tie."

"But it was the Reckoner who gave Blackham away," said Harmer. "How do you square that with your theory ?"

"There are one or two things I cannot account for at the moment. All I know is that Harry's tale is a pure invention. The threat was carried out. He may have escaped, or perhaps the punishment was never intended to be more than of brief duration. There can only be one possible reason why he fabricated that story—and it concerns that girl. He is absolutely in her toils."

"And you think she is innocent!" said Rose scornfully.

"I think she had no hand in these crimes. But I have never suggested that she is not withholding information. Of course, she is entitled to do that."

"She ought to be made to talk," said Rose warmly.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Harmer. "A nice state of affairs, when men are threatened by that scoundrel, and certain people who could assist in putting an end to his infamous career refuse to aid the police. I have done with Harry. He has got himself mixed up with a gang of crooks. So much for a lot of stupid idealism. I suppose the girl will get him in the end."

"I wonder!" mused Brent.

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Harry is a walking enigma—unconventional enough to risk social obloquy in order to prove his convictions. The girl started by arousing his sympathy. Even now it may only be sympathy."

Rose was shrugging her shoulders impatiently.

Love and contempt swept her bosom alternately. Had she possessed the means to put Ann in prison, she would not have hesitated for one moment. As for Reynolds, she wanted to think that he was merely the victim of a conniving woman.

“You say he looked—unwell?” he asked.

“Unwell is scarcely the word. He was pallid and haggard—like a man who has been through hell. I’d like to know exactly what happened to him.”

“Serve him right!” snapped Harmer. “I’ll waste no sympathy on him. He’ll never enter this house again. A man would have to be a fool not to realise that his relations with that girl are——”

“Father!” ejaculated Rose. “You have no right to assume that. Harry was never—vicious.”

“He was always a fool, and a fool is easy prey to a woman of that sort.”

A wordy battle ensued. Harmer was on his dignity. He wanted nothing to do with a man who had such small regard for law and order. He prided himself on his citizenship—even at that moment when he possessed a document which, when signed, would put an end to a quite flourishing business started by a group of ex-soldiers. That business had clashed with Harmer’s interests, and the process of smashing it, and purchasing the remnants for a song, was now near completion.

That afternoon Rose called on the sick man.

She took with her some flowers and fruit—the latter purchased at a colossal price. Even now she was hoping to save something from the burning. In a way she emulated her parent. Harmer loved to enter an unpromising fight—for wealth. Rose found easy love boring. It was the competitive element that called her into battle. To be beaten by a girl from the gutter!

“Miss Harmer!” announced Tony to his master.

“Ah! Show her up, Tony.”

Rose looked like her floral namesake as she entered the room. Winter roses! Dew-laden and fragrant, with all the thorns concealed.

“Why, Harry!” she said. “You are like a ghost. Malcolm told me all about it. You poor old thing!”

“Then that saves me a lot of breath. How is the car behaving?”

“The car! I haven’t come to talk about cars. Where—where can I put these?”

Reynolds gazed appreciatively at the huge bouquet and the fruit.

“Are they for me?”

“Of course. I suppose you are permitted to eat fruit?”

“I hope so. It is awfully good of you, Rose. Will you put the flowers in the vase—there?”

She arranged them with deft hands, and then came back to the bed.

“I am going to nurse you,” she said suddenly.

"Oh, no, you are not."

"But I am. I have an idea, and you are going to fall in with it. You remember our little place at Bournemouth?"

"I remember an elephantine house with about forty rooms, and a regular emporium——"

"Exactly! Well, it is the ideal spot to convalesce in. Lots of sunshine, nice walks in the park. You can take Tony with you and recover."

"Just a moment!" he interrupted. "But do you imagine I am on my last legs? My dear Rose, I appreciate your generosity, but it so happens that I have some important work to do—in about five days' time—and the emporium is certainly not the place for it. Thanks all the same!"

"I—I could slap you!"

"You may, but I am obdurate in this."

"You don't want to come?"

"I don't."

"My company wouldn't give you any joy?"

"It would, but I must deny myself the pleasure. How is Brent progressing? Still pursuing the phantom?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Doesn't it mean a great deal to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I am given to understand that Malcolm is much appreciated at headquarters. If he makes this big haul it will probably mean promotion."

"And how does that affect me?"



"Isn't he rather fond of you, Rose?"

She blushed a little, and then screwed up her mouth.

"If he were, I see no grounds for such a hasty conclusion as you draw."

"But he is a good fellow, and would make an admirable husband. A little thick-headed at times, but——"

Rose turned on him with acerbity.

"Are you trying to arrange my future?"

"I wouldn't dare. Don't look so—murderous, especially now, when I am not in a fit state to defend myself."

"You—you annoy me. You seem to make a joke of our friendship. That is what hurts."

Reynolds became very serious. Here she reached a sensitive spot. For months he had held his hand in a certain business merely because of that long-standing friendship. Writ bold on the Reckoner's list was the name of Harmer.

"You make a great mistake," he said tensely. "Friendships do count—sometimes when they shouldn't."

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"Don't ask me. My mind is not very clear yet—after the lapse I experienced."

"Lapse!" She drew closer to him. "Harry, you can't hoodwink me. You had no more lapse of memory than I had. It was the Reckoner who was responsible for your sudden disappearance. I

know it; Brent knows it; and father knows it. Oh, it's madness to carry on like this. You think you have a duty towards—someone. But your duty to society should come first."

"Lord, how you carry on!"

"Don't mock me, for God's sake! It tears my heart to see you making a fool of yourself with that girl."

"Hadn't you better stop at that?" he asked, fixing her with his keen eyes.

"Why should I? Aren't we candid friends? You set the pace just now by hinting at certain eventualities between me and Malcolm. Well, I am more than hinting that that girl has got you enthralled. Before she has finished she will drag your name into the mud. You have been seen with her. You know the long round that gossip goes. People make it their business to find out all about a girl who is employed by a well-known bachelor, and who is seen dining with him—and other things."

"Do you imagine I care two straws for vulgar gossip? Since you have brought this matter up, let us see exactly where we stand. I have helped Ann a little, and she appreciates it. Beyond that there is nothing—and never will be anything. I am not half good enough for Ann, and very soon she and I will part for ever."

She was taken aback by the seriousness of his face. There was no doubt he was in earnest.

“Soon! When?”

“In a week or two. Ann is going with her father to Canada.”

“Her father! Why, he is to be tried in France in a few days. Malcolm says he will get a life sentence.”

“I think not.”

“But he has no chance! The evidence——”

“All doctored. Blackham is not a saint, but at least he is not guilty of that charge. Two of the finest lawyers in France will defend him.”

Rose opened her mouth wide.

“At your—your expense, eh?”

“That is my privilege.”

“Are you—are you mad?”

“Perhaps. The kind of madness which prevents me from sitting still watching an innocent man convicted chiefly because he is poor.”

“It seems to me that you are out to defend any crook, through a mistaken sentimentalism,” she said tartly.

“Not quite that. There are some men I should love to hang—and quite a few of them are in privileged positions—outside the law, one might almost say.”

“There goes your red flag again. I can’t bear any more to-day. I came hoping I might be of help to you, and you refuse to let me help you. I had better go now.”

“I need no help, Rose. Believe me, I am quite

capable of standing on my own feet. But that doesn't mean that I am not grateful to you. The flowers are exquisite."

She went at last, feeling crushed and humiliated. His thoughts were not for her, but for that gutter-bred girl, who, by some miracle, had weaved a spell about him. Yet he had sworn that relationship should end soon. She wondered if that really would come about—if Ann would let him go. She was passing along the hall when Ann herself came to view. Rose stopped dead.

"So you are still here?" she said icily.

"Yes."

"I wonder you have the impudence."

Ann's face went crimson, but she met the scornful stare without flinching.

"I don't understand you," she said calmly. "I am employed by Mr. Reynolds to do certain work."

"And you have done it well," retorted Rose. "His association with you has alienated him from all his friends."

Ann's lips tightened.

"Except—you," she said tersely.

"Yes. I at least understand how it all came about. He is incurably sentimental. You have played on that—abused his sympathy and sullied his good name. Even the police suspect him of aiding and abetting certain of your—friends, at your instigation."

Ann's normally quiet nature was aroused to

burning heat. She clenched her hands, and stepped closer to her tormentor.

"That is not true, and you know it. If you are a fair specimen of his friends, then perhaps it is as well that he should lose them all. He does not wish to see you, but still you come, and your motive is not sympathy, but self-interest. Good-day!"

Rose gulped, and was rendered dumb. No woman had ever dared address her in that manner before—her, the daughter of John Harmer. Quickly she thought of a hundred retorts, but it was too late. Ann had gone. Tony was standing by the door, suppressing his chuckles. It was the finest thing Tony had ever heard.

"Good-day, Miss Harmer," he said politely.

Rose swept by him as if he did not exist.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXX

REYNOLDS's recuperative powers were astonishing. In four days he was on his feet again, with new life shining from his eyes. Ann knew not whence he derived this wonderful flow of vitality, nor did she quite solve the mystery of his illness, until Tony, in an unguarded moment, let fall the truth.

"Doctor says the wound is healing fine," he said.

"Wound! What wound?"

"Lumme, I've done it! You see——"

"So he was wounded?"

"Yes—shot."



“By whom?”

“I don’t know—and maybe he don’t know. Clean lost his memory about all that happened. Anyway, he is all right now.”

Ann said no more just then. She was waiting for Reynolds, who had intimated his desire to go on with the book. When at last he came, it was the old charming Reynolds, placidly smoking, and looking as if he had not a care in the world.

“I’m late, Ann?”

“Oh, no. I am early.”

“So keen as all that?”

“I haven’t done any work for a long time.”

“Then let us resume.”

But, to her surprise, he did not make a start. He seemed to be fumbling for words—words that would not come. It was not like him to lose the thread of his arguments.

“It’s no use, Ann,” he confessed. “I cannot concentrate this morning. My mind is elsewhere.”

“Far—away?”

“Not far. In two days I propose to go to France.”

She started at this, for she had never forgotten his promise to help her father, although she believed he was beyond help.

“Not—to the trial?”

“Yes.”

“Do you—do you think there is any hope?”

"It depends upon what happens in the meantime."

"I don't understand."

"No, and I cannot elucidate matters—at the moment. But there is a man who knows a great deal about the affair with which your father is charged. That man is the Reckoner."

"The Reckoner! But he will not help us."

"And why not?"

"I—I feel he will not. Even if he would, how can you hope to find him?"

"That is not difficult."

"So you—have met him! It was he who—who inflicted that wound upon you? And you told me——"

"I told you the truth, and I asked you to trust me."

"I do—I do. But my father—how could the Reckoner help him?"

"Because he knows someone who knows who the murderer really is. If that man can be brought to give evidence, your father will be free."

"But is it possible to produce that man—to make him speak?"

"I think so."

"The Reckoner will do that?"

"Yes."

"For you?"

"No—for you, Ann."

She blushed, and shook her head slowly.

"I—I wish it were not necessary. There was a

time when—when I thought—— You see, he helped me once or twice—before I really understood what sort of a man he was. But I don't understand. Where will you find him ? ”

“ That is a secret. The great thing is to free your father from that serious charge. Suppose that is achieved, will you go abroad with him—to help him start a new life ? ”

Ann hesitated, reluctant to confess that she believed Blackham was incapable of going straight. But his eyes were on her—it was a test of loyalty.

“ You would advise that ? ” she quavered.

“ Yes—unless—— ”

“ Unless—what ? ”

“ Suppose the Reckoner loved you—— ”

“ Loved me ! ” she gasped.

“ Would that be very surprising ? Let us suppose that. Let us assume he would give up his present mysterious exploits in order to win your love and respect—would you go with him, as his wife, to help him forget the past ? ”

“ No.”

“ You think he is beyond the pale ? ”

“ I—I don't want to judge him—after he saved me from a brute, and helped me to make a start in business. But—I have no love for him. It was never anything more than admiration. And there is another reason—which I can't tell you. If—if he will help my father to prove his innocence, I shall be grateful, but beyond that—beyond that—— ”

"I understand. You prefer to go with your father?"

"I have not said——"

"Well, we will leave that matter in abeyance. The first thing is to remove the threat. Apart from this wrong charge, there are other minor charges against him in this country, charges that may prevent him from returning to England. You must be prepared to join him elsewhere—if you so decide."

Ann nodded her head miserably. She was recalling that swift kiss of his, and the subsequent change in his attitude. She had the feeling that he had regretted that impulsive act, and was now doing his best to let her know that he had meant nothing serious.

"Whatever you think is right I will do," she said.

"No. You must do what you yourself feel is right."

And so she left him, filled with new hope regarding her father but depressed at the thought of the possibility of giving up this pleasant job.

. . . . .

That night found the Reckoner busy again, visiting old haunts on the quest for Jukes, who had taken the Tiger's advice and changed his lodgings. By eleven o'clock the Reckoner had succeeded in getting hold of Rogers. Failing to find him in any of his habitual resorts, he went to the rooms which

Rogers rented and picked the lock of the outer door. When Rogers entered the place, he gave a wild shriek to find the Reckoner sitting calmly by the gas fire, with a pistol on the table before him. He turned to flee, but only made two steps.

“Stop!”

Rogers’s knees quaked at the sight of the levelled pistol, and he came back slowly.

“That’s better! Sit down!”

As if under the control of a hypnotist, Rogers deposited his trembling form in a chair indicated, immediately opposite his awful visitor.

“Now, you dirty little traitor, what have you got to say?”

“I—I——”

“Speak up!”

“I—the Tiger forced it from me. He—had a pull over me—threatened to put me in jug unless I—I did as he told me.”

“And what do you imagine the punishment is—for doing as he told you?”

“I—I couldn’t help myself. Give—give me another chance. I won’t go back——”

The Reckoner made a contemptuous noise in his throat, and Rogers thought his last moment had come. He slid off the chair and grovelled before the masked figure.

“Get up! You—louse! If you can give me certain information, I may forget that I ever met you. I want to know where Jukes is living.”



Rogers crept back into his chair, and moistened his lips.

"He's—he's——"

"Hurry!"

"He's living here—with me."

The Reckoner stood up suddenly.

"Where is he now?"

"Out. I'm—expecting him any minute."

"Has he a key to the door?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Put up your hands!"

Rogers obeyed the unexpected command. The fingers of the Reckoner went through his pockets. There was no concealed weapon—only a large knife, which was removed.

"Now you will do exactly as I tell you. Sit there by the fire, and keep your mouth shut. One word of warning and—well, you may regret it. The door opens inwards?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

"Take care!" warned the shivering man. "He's deadly with a gun—and he always carries one."

"Thanks for the tip, but I have had occasion to remember that. Sit there—your back to the door!"

Rogers obeyed nervously, and the Reckoner lighted a cigarette and waited, with ears alert. Some minutes passed, and then there came the sound of footsteps from the outside passage. He threw

the end of the cigarette into the fender and ran lightly towards the door. It opened a few seconds later, hiding him from view.

"Hello, Bill!"

It was Jukes's nasal drawl. The next moment an arm went round his neck, and simultaneously his weapon was taken from his hip-pocket.

"What the——!"

He twisted himself round, and came under the gaze of two intense eyes that gleamed through the pallid mask of the Reckoner.

"You!"

"Get back—there!"

Jukes backed before the steady pistol, his yellow teeth displayed in a grin of mingled hate and terror. He came upon a chair and sat down heavily, his breath coming and going in great gasps.

"Ah! Now we will talk."

Jukes turned on Rogers fiercely.

"You slug!"

"I—I couldn't help——!"

"Yah!"

"When you have finished you will give your attention to me," said the Reckoner. "I've come to get you hanged, Mr. Jukes—hanged for the murder of Sir Henry Lush."

"You—you try to prove it."

"That is a simple matter. The police have your fingerprints, but they do not know they are yours. I happen to be the only person outside your little

clique who possesses that important information. The imprint of your fingers, a piece of chewing-gum and a few other small items will send you to the gallows as sure as you are born. And the Reckoner will be exonerated. How does that appeal to you?"

Jukes was under no misapprehension regarding the danger which threatened him. His ugly face lost its immobility. Fear swept over the coarse features.

"You—you daren't!" he muttered.

"I tell you that is my fixed determination, unless——"

"Unless what?"

He jumped at the small loophole that was offered.

"Unless you tell the whole truth about another affair—in a French court of justice."

"What affair?"

"You know—Blackham."

"I don't know what you are getting at."

"You do. Ten years ago a man was killed at Grenoble. You and the Tiger were in that, but you were clever enough to get Blackham indicted. I want to know who put that man away."

"I didn't. I swear I——"

"Then it was the Tiger?"

Jukes remained silent, biting his finger-nails in his great agitation.

"Was it the Tiger?"

"Yep. We entered that place to burgle it. Blackham did no more than keep guard outside.

It was a ticklish job, and the Tiger came prepared for trouble. He knew the place inside out, and brought with him a glass on which he had managed to get Blackham's fingerprints. Also he wore Blackham's old boots. The glass with the fingerprints was left, and a similar glass was taken away—arter shooting was necessary. . . . Some of the stuff was found in Blackham's lodgings, but he managed to get away."

"That sounds like the truth. Are you prepared to state those facts—in France?"

Jukes went livid with fear.

"It would get me ten years. I didn't do the shooting, but they'd get me on another charge."

"They would."

"Then I'm not saying——"

"You prefer an English judge and jury, and the sure conviction for murder?"

"My God!"

The Reckoner remained as impassive as a statue, still holding the pistol before him.

"Shall I get into touch with—Brent?"

"No! Wait!"

Again the nail-biting, all the nervous actions of a man who sees before him two clear alternatives. The eyes were searching for a weapon, but there was none available. The Reckoner controlled the situation.

"I'll give you one minute," he said at last. "Otherwise we shall miss the night train."

"The night train!"

"We go to France to-night—or to Scotland Yard. Which is it to be?"

"You wouldn't dare face up at Scotland Yard," blustered Jukes.

"Make no mistake about that. Under this mask is quite a respectable citizen. Brent will be so pleased to land the murderer of Sir Henry Lush he is not likely to take any notice of wild allegations. So you prefer the Yard? Well, let us go. Stand up!"

Jukes jumped to his feet, made a threatening gesture, and then succumbed.

"I'll go with you—to France," he mumbled.  
"You hold all the winning cards, damn you!"

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXXI

BLACKHAM had been awaiting his trial in fear and trepidation. Under the French criminal law he felt he stood no earthly chance of being acquitted. He had to prove his innocence, and until he could do that he was adjudged guilty. In his cell he cursed the Reckoner long and loud—that sinister figure who had used him, only to betray him.

Then a strange thing happened. A celebrated French lawyer paid him a visit, and informed him that he had been instructed to appear for the defence, with a confrère.



“Who sent you?” asked Blackham.

“That I am not at liberty to divulge. I want you to tell me everything, m’sieur—all the details that you can remember.”

Blackham told his story, and a record was made of it. As the days passed, further questions were put to him, and, on the day before the trial started, he was informed that a valuable witness for the defence had been found.

“Who?” he demanded.

“A M’sieur Jukes.”

“Jukes! Why, he is the man I told you about. He hates me. I tell you he will send me to——”

“M’sieur is wrong. I have every hope that the charge will fail.”

“But I don’t understand. Jukes is in league with the Tiger. One of those two did the murder.”

“That we know. You must have patience.”

Followed the opening of the trial, the reconstruction of the tragedy, the apparent proof of Blackham’s guilt. Despite the lawyer’s assertions, Blackham’s heart fell. A letter was given to him. It was from Ann. She told him that a friend was going to help him. He must continue to hope.

Then, after several days of terrible anxiety and suspense, Jukes was put into the witness-box. By the time they had finished with Jukes the whole case had changed. Sullenly he told his story—a story backed by proof. He swore that he had come forward voluntarily, in the cause of justice, and

begged the indulgence of the court. Ultimately a verdict of "Not Guilty" was given, and Jukes was detained on another charge.

Blackham could scarcely believe his ears. The lawyer came to him afterwards, exceedingly pleased with himself, and rubbing his hands together.

"You are acquitted," he said. "But for the man Jukes, nothing could have saved you."

"Is he mad?"

"I think not."

"But they will put him away! Why—why did he do this?"

"I cannot say, but perhaps your friend will inform you."

"My—friend?"

"The man who briefed me—who compelled the chief witness to appear."

"Who is he?"

"That you will soon know. You are to go to Paris to-night, and meet him at the *Tête de Bœuf* in the *Rue Binet*. You know the place?"

"Yes."

"You will ask for Mr. X."

"I have no money."

"Here are a thousand francs."

Blackham caught the midnight train to Paris, and arrived there on the following evening. He remembered well the *Tête de Bœuf*—a ramshackle, ancient inn where he and the Tiger had been

went to foregather. On applying there, he learnt that Mr. X had a room on the top floor—number 77. He went up the stairs and knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

He entered the room, and saw the back of a man, reclining in an easy chair.

“I—I called——” he commenced.

The face came round, and a cry of amazement and rage left Blackham’s lips. He was gazing into the mask of the Reckoner.

“You—you!”

“Ah, Blackham! Sit down, and make yourself at home.”

“But—but I was told I should find a friend here!”

“Well?”

“You—you are no friend of mine. You betrayed me——”

“Really, Blackham, your amazing credulity and stupidity annoy me. I have wasted most valuable time getting you out of this mess. Jukes was most unwilling to come. I had to use—force.”

Blackham stared woodenly.

“You mean to say—it was you who—who briefed those lawyers, who——?”

“Who else? No one seems to care two pins whether Ann is an orphan or not.”

“Then who wrote that note to Brent?”

“The same old friend—Anton.”

“But he didn’t know where I was living.”

"Rogers knew, and a little ready cash is like the Kingdom of Heaven to Rogers."

"The swine!"

"Not a bad description."

"But I saw that note. It was written on paper identical with a piece sent to Sir Henry Lush and signed by the Reckoner."

"A cigar band—fashioned by the Tiger. He got in before me then. Rather clever of him. He has a habit of repeating his old tricks—and it seems to have succeeded rather well—so far. Well, he is just near the end of his tether, and has had a nice long run for his money."

"My God! If ever I meet him, and Rogers!"

"You won't meet either of them. England is closed to you, Blackham. You must seek a livelihood elsewhere."

"But Ann. I must——"

"Ann will join you—at least, I think so."

"Where the devil can I go? I'm incapacitated—too old to make a new start. I'd be a drag upon her—yes, I'll admit that. Poor Ann, I haven't given her much of a show, and I'm grateful to you—grateful for all——"

He was near to tears, for he had been through a great ordeal. The one decent thing in his life was as strong as ever—his love for his daughter.

"I want her," he resumed. "But it wouldn't do. Once you start this way, it's hard to get out

of it. Dog with a bad name—you know the maxim ? ”

“ Ann must decide, not you. Write to her, and tell her that you have no further need to engage in the search for easy money. Someone has made you a bequest of four pounds a week, and you are going to try to live on it—honestly.”

“ Why should I deceive her ? ”

“ You will not be deceiving her. It is true.”

“ True ? I haven’t a penny.”

“ You will have. You are going to Canada—to Toronto. There is an account opened in your name at the Dominion Bank, and you will be entitled to draw that four pounds per week—in dollars—and no more.”

“ But who—— ? ”

“ The Reckoner is settling all his debts—and in honest coin, if the proceeds from overcharged commodities can be called honest. But *you* need have no scruples.”

Blackham thrust out his hand.

“ I’m—I’m——”

“ For Ann’s sake. She, too, had rather an exaggerated notion of the Reckoner’s villainy. Well, we will leave it at that. Write to her and tell her where to join you.”

“ Is this—a dream ? ”

“ Far from it. The Reckoner is shortly retiring from the world of crime, and with him goes the Tiger.”



"You—you mean to get him?"

"He is as good as got already, but there must be one more meeting, and that very soon. Now go!"

"What—what can I say—to you?"

"Nothing! Good-bye!"

There was a hand-grip and Blackham shuffled out of the place and was soon lost in the traffic. The Reckoner sat on for some time, deep in thought, and then removed the mask to display the rather classic features of the artist. Close at hand was a small oval mirror. He placed the mask upon it, and stared at it.

"Amazing—that she did not guess!" he mused.

Yet it was really not remarkable. In this second rôle of his he had altered his voice—its inflection, his mode of speech. Somehow he had built up a second personality, and as time went by he got to regard it as a different entity. It needed but the donning of the mask—he had several of them, fashioned by his own hand—to shut out the peaceful world of Harry Reynolds, and to bring within focus a quite different life. He reflected that Ann might have guessed had he continued to present to her both personalities alternately, and for that reason the Reckoner had faded out once she was established at the studio.

There were times when, almost unconsciously, he gazed at his hands, his eyes, as if trying to recall

something. But the image was fugitive, and evaded her. He wondered what she would say, how she would act, if this truth were burst upon her. Then he shook his head as he formed the resolution to keep his secret, and shortly to bury the Reckoner for ever.

He started as a knock came on the door, and, on asking the knocker to enter, he was confronted with a small dark man whom he employed as a scout : the only person in the world who knew the truth about the Reckoner.

“ Well, Henri ? ” he said in French.

“ I have found Samoviev.”

“ Good work ! Is he in Paris ? ”

“ Yes. But he leaves for England on the morning boat from Calais, with a passport in the name of Jules Masson.”

“ To-morrow—that is the fifteenth ? ”

Henri nodded, and the Reckoner made a note in his pocket-book.

“ Now about the photograph ? ”

“ I have it. He did not see me. I snapped him as he was leaving the hotel—in conversation with another man. Here it is. That is Samoviev on the left.”

“ Hm ! Beard and moustache ! Rather fortunate, in case our mutual friend has met him before.”

“ I am sure he has not.”

“ All the better. Does he speak English ? ”

"No. Russian and French only."

"I must polish up my French, since it is dear Anton's native tongue."

"But a Russian might easily make mistakes."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"M'sieur, I did not suggest——!"

"I forgive you. That is all, Henri, for the moment. I also sail for England to-morrow."

"Bon voyage, m'sieur. And take care. The Tiger is a dangerous man yet."

Reynolds smiled. Time was now of the utmost value, for it was certain that after Jukes's statements a warrant would be issued for the arrest of the Tiger. Ten minutes later he sent a telegram to an official at the British Foreign Office. It said :

*Serge Samoviev will travel to Dover to-morrow morning, under the name of Jules Masson.*

On the following day he saw Samoviev at the Gare du Nord, and later on the Channel steamer. At Dover everyone was scrutinised closely. Reynolds managed to get immediately behind Samoviev. The latter showed his passport with perfect calm. He was detained, and Reynolds passed on. The trap was now laid !

ANN sat in her lodgings with a telegram clutched in her hand. It was from Blackham, and it told her that he was acquitted, and was writing by the next mail. It was all so unexpected, she could scarcely give expression to the joy in her heart. When at last her stupefaction passed, she went round to Reynolds's studio.

"The gov'nor is still away," said Tony.

"Yes—yes. I know, but somehow I had to come. I have had wonderful news. When—when will Mr. Reynolds return?"

"About five o'clock—so the telegram says."

"I'll call then."

Shortly after five o'clock she revisited the studio. Reynolds had just come in, but he saw her, and noted immediately the glad expression in her eyes.

"You—you were at the trial?" she asked.

"Yes."

"He—he was acquitted. Oh, I know it was due to you. How did you work that wonderful miracle?"

"I didn't. It was a clever lawyer."

"But you—you must have instructed him?"

"Well, yes. No man likes to sit still and see an innocent person suffer for another's crime."

"How—how good of you! Did you see my father—afterwards?"

"Yes."

"Is he coming back?"

"I fear not. The serious charge has failed, but there might be other charges brought—if he landed again in England. I understand that some relative has come to his aid, and that he proposes to go to the Colonies."

"Some relative?"

"Evidently someone took compassion on him. Anyhow, he said he would write to you and tell you everything. Ann, he may need you in this new life which he contemplates starting."

"Could I—help him?"

"Don't you think you could?"

"Yes—yes; but—it's no use; I can't explain."

"Don't try. If the call comes, you will know what to do."

"But my work—here?"

"I have practically finished my book. In fact, I have decided not to finish it."

"Mr. Reynolds!"

"It is not good work, Ann. I have neglected the things which I do much better."

"I understand. You want me to go."

"I didn't——"

"But it is in your eyes. I believe—I believe you did not intend that book to be published; that you took pity on me when I was in need of work; that my wages was just—charity."

"Ann!"



"That has been my fear all along. Don't think my gratitude is any the less, but the thought hurts—hurts me deeply."

"How foolishly you talk! Why, Ann, I am the gainer. Until you came my studio was a dull affair. You brought into it laughter—and light. You started new thoughts in my mind—made me realise that my life was quite a small one. Your companionship has been——"

"You—you mean you paid me a wage for my companionship? Oh, how you wound when you do not intend to!"

"It is my clumsy tongue. But suppose for a moment it was—to some extent—sympathy? Am I not entitled to help someone whom fate has treated unkindly? Would you chide me for taking care of a child who needed help?"

"You—you make it worse and worse," she almost sobbed.

"Perhaps I do, but don't judge me too harshly."

"Harshly! I owe you so much, and feel that never in this life shall I be able to repay you. That is what hurts—to be so—so helpless. And now I am discharged?"

"Discharged!"

"Well, you have no more work for me to do, have you?"

He paced the room indecisively. How terribly difficult it was to tell her that the time of final parting was close at hand! Yet there seemed to

him to be no alternative—except to take her in his arms and tell her that he loved her more than life itself; and that he had no intention of doing, for reasons that were a little difficult to explain, but which were big and solid to him, notwithstanding.

“Better wait and see what your father has to suggest,” he said.

“Very—well.”

. . . . .

Not far away, the Tiger was getting ready to receive his visitor. That Samoviev was, as Siki averred, “velly dam clever,” was proved by the arrival of a telegram shortly after seven o’clock informing him that “S” would keep the appointment at the time stated. Even now the Jap was working furiously on the document, in the faint hope of finding the key at the last moment. The Tiger went into the library, and found his hireling looking very hot and bothered.

“Well?”

“No can do.”

“You mean—you have decoded—nothing?”

“Velly dam difficult.”

“Yah, you are an incompetent fool! I ought to have engaged another man, as I swore I would. Haven’t you an idea what the thing is about?”

The Jap shook his head despondently. For almost the first time in his career a code had beaten

him, and a handsome fee had gone past him, for the Tiger paid only on results.

"I might have knocked another ten thousand out of him if I knew the contents," muttered the Tiger. "You still have nearly two hours. Get to it!"

But when the hall clock chimed the hour of nine, Siki was as far from success as ever. He gathered together his sheets of paper, crumpled them in his yellow hands, and flung them into the fire. The Tiger came and caught him in the act.

"So that is the end?"

Siki nodded, and looked as if he was contemplating committing hari-kari. The Tiger scowled, and told him to make himself scarce.

"You pay me something—yes?"

"Not a damned cent. That was understood."

"But weeks I waste!"

"Whose fault is that?"

The outer bell rang, and the Tiger pricked up his ears. He waved his hand to dismiss Siki, but Siki still stood his ground.

"Get out!"

"Waitee. You plee-tend to Samoviev you know what is written here. No need tell him; he knows—roughly. Maybe he give you more than he say, eh?"

"I might try."

"Now you give Siki present?"

"All right. Here's twenty pounds. Take it and go."

The Jap seized the four five-pound notes, nodded his head, and beat a quick retreat. A few seconds later the servant announced Mr. S." The Tiger rubbed his hands, and drew a chair near the fire. Samoviev entered. He was clad in a big overcoat lined with fur, striped trousers, spats, and silk hat. His face was pale, and sported a beard and moustache.

"Well met, m'sieur!" he said in excellent French. "I trust I am not late?"

"Absolutely punctual! You have brought——?"

Samoviev smiled, and tapped the pocket inside his huge coat. From outward view it looked attractively bulky.

"Please sit down! Can I offer you any refreshment?"

"Thanks! A glass of whiskey. This climate agrees with me ill. It is colder than Russia."

The Tiger himself produced glasses and a decanter from a sideboard, and poured out liberal doses.

"Now to business. You mentioned a sum in your letter?"

"So. I have brought it."

"I have received another offer."

"But, m'sieur, it was an arrangement. You agreed——"

"At the time, yes. But I did not fully realise the importance of the document. Since then I have closely perused it."

"Then it has been decoded?"

"Yes."

"In that case," said Samoviev calmly, "it is useless to me."

"What?"

"Do you expect me to pay a large sum of money for a document the contents of which are known to you—with the possibility of your doing business with another Government?"

"But you said you did not mind whether it was decoded or not."

"Merely because I doubted your ability to decode it. We have a man in Russia who never fails, but now——"

He spread out his hands and stood up. The Tiger bit his lip, and realised that he had made a *faux pas*.

"Wait!" he begged. "That was not true. I have spent weeks on the damned thing, with the aid of an expert, and we have failed utterly to decode a single word."

"Then why——?"

"Well, human nature is weak. The Russian Government has plenty of money, and I—I have less. I will admit I lied. No one outside the British Foreign Office has a notion of what that document contains."

"I am inclined to believe that. Now for the document!"

"I have it here."

The Tiger put his hand into his pocket and



produced the document. He untied the pink tape and held the front page for Samoviev to see—but a sufficient distance to retain control of it.

“That is the thing you want, eh?”

“Yes.”

“The money, then.”

Samoviev produced a large bundle, tied up with twine and heavily sealed. The Tiger’s eyes glowed.

“A knife?”

The Tiger produced a small one from his pocket. Samoviev took it and cut the twine. As the paper came away, the Tiger saw the ends of many crisp notes. Then suddenly Samoviev’s hand went down and up. The document was torn from the Tiger’s hand, and a pistol stared him in the face.

“What the——?”

From behind the beard came the mocking voice of the Reckoner. The Tiger knew that voice among a million, and he gasped like a drowning man.

“Don’t move, my dear Anton! This is what they call checkmate. I have just left your friend Jukes—at Grenoble. He was busy telling the police all about a certain affair that took place some years back. You remember?”

“Sacré!”

“Very expressive! I am afraid I was rather lenient with him. I gave him the choice of two evils—ten years for helping you to murder a Frenchman, or hanging for murdering an Englishman off

his own bat, but at your command. He preferred ten years. When he comes out there may still be time to hang him."

"You—you liar!"

"Well, the Reckoner has had some nasty things said about him, but no one ever accused him of being a liar. You should read the French papers, Anton. I have wrapped up these quite valueless notes in one—the *Petit Parisien*. Take a glance at it!"

With his left hand he scattered the dummy notes and threw the newspaper across to the Tiger. A second's perusal of the close of the Grenoble case was sufficient. The Tiger's cheeks went pallid with fear.

"Wait!" he said hoarsely. "We can do business, you and I. Put that gun away!"

"Oh, no. I am rather particular with whom I do business, and, as a matter of fact, I am going out of business to-morrow. But you, my dear Anton, are retiring to-night."

"Eh?"

"We are awaiting a visitor. He is due at any minute, and he carries with him a warrant for your arrest—an appeal from France very promptly attended to on this side. I asked him to call at a quarter past nine. Of course, he may not come, but somehow I think he will."

"You—you asked him?"

"A very intimate friend of mine—Inspector Brent"

The Tiger made a swift movement, but stopped when he realised the danger.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Come in with me while you've a chance. He'll get you too."

"Surely you wouldn't tell him?"

"If I go, you go."

"That might be a little inconvenient, and not at all according to plan. Ah, the bell!"

The Reckoner moved to the French window and slipped behind the curtains, but his face remained in view, and also the steady pistol.

"I advise you to stand perfectly still," he said.

"*Mon dieu*, if——!"

"Stand still, or——!"

Brent suddenly broke into the room, and the Tiger swung round on him. There was a sharp click behind the curtain, and both hand and face disappeared. Brent had seen neither. His whole attention was on the Tiger.

"Anton Dubois, I hold a warrant for your arrest," he said.

"Pshaw! There is some mistake."

"There is no mistake. Jenkins! Walters!"

Two other officers entered the room. On the table was lying the copy of the *Petit Parisien*. The Tiger gulped as he saw it again, and, as a sergeant approached him with handcuffs extended, he nodded and put his right hand into his side-pocket.

"Hold up your——!"

Brent's cry came too late. With a swift movement the Tiger raised the pocket across his breast. There was a muffled report, and he tottered and fell.

"Confound! He's done it!"

All three men leaned over the inert form. The Tiger's eyes were half closed, and his breath coming in gasps.

"Not that—for me," he croaked. "The Tiger is never—caged. I did—Grenoble—affair. Jukes — Jukes — killed Lush — got document — the Reckoner—curse him—Reckoner has—it now and——"

A paroxysm, a rattle in his throat, and the Tiger passed.

#### THE SPLENDID CRIME

#### XXXIII

BRENT arrived at his office the next morning to find a bulky letter, registered and addressed to him personally. He opened it, and found enclosed a document. Accompanying it was a brief note:

*A lover of his country sends you something that is better at the Foreign Office than anywhere else.*

In the right bottom corner was inscribed a pair of scales in red ink.

"Well, I'm——!"

Brent's clerk looked up enquiringly.

"You were saying, sir——?"

“Nothing—nothing.”

Brent took the document to his chief, and later an official from the Foreign Office called in order to identify it.

“There is no doubt this is the missing document,” he said. “Where was it found?”

“It was sent to Inspector Brent by a crook who calls himself the Reckoner.”

“Well, he has relieved our minds of a great worry. Sir Henry Lush was entrusted with this document for a special purpose. I understood that you suspected a man called the Reckoner?”

“We did,” said Brent humbly. “But we were wrong. Notwithstanding, he is wanted on sundry charges. The man Samoviev, who was detained at the port, was evidently on his way to do a deal with Dubois, but the Reckoner got in first. Well, patriotism is at least one redeeming feature in the Reckoner’s character.”

“It was he who gave information regarding Samoviev’s intention to visit England?”

“It looks very much like it.”

“And then undoubtedly impersonated the fellow?”

“They hated each other,” said Brent. “Dubois was using the Reckoner as a red-herring. Well, when thief meets thief, honest men get their rights.”

The official left with the document, and Brent went about his business. Of late his opinion of the Reckoner had changed a great deal. It was now



firmly established that murder or personal gain was not his object.

"I am convinced that this fellow believes he is doing good," he said to Harmer. "In almost every case in which he figures we find the element of injustice on the part of his victim."

"Tush!" snapped Harmer. "What did Swinton do to merit the punishment he got?"

"Nothing, from our point of view; but to a man who is filled with all sorts of foolish ideals the outlook may be different. In a number of cases his victims have been men of undoubted greed and dishonesty."

"Really, such sentiments come strangely from the mouth of a police officer," said Rose.

"Duty and prejudice are two different things. The Reckoner has broken the law, and we shall leave no stone unturned to make him pay for it."

"I certainly hope you will," said Harmer. "But so far the police have achieved little."

Brent shrugged his shoulders, for the matter was a delicate one with him.

"The difficulties are greater than you imagine," he said. "Identification, for instance. Who is going to identify the Reckoner?"

"Those whom he has so savagely assaulted."

"Would Swinton care to come forward and swear that any man was the Reckoner? The mask business sounds melodramatic, novelettish, until you come face to face with the complexities that it

creates. Once I thought I possessed his fingerprints, but they turn out to be those of another man. Even Blackham, his closest associate, has never seen his real face."

"He may say so," said Harmer scornfully.

"I believe him. For a time he thought the Reckoner had betrayed him. He would have given him away then had he been able to. But now it transpires that he was wrong. The Reckoner actually got him acquitted."

"How?"

"By bringing pressure to bear on a man named Jukes. Jukes was faced with the alternatives of going to France and making a clean breast of an old affair which took place at Grenoble, thus establishing Blackham's innocence, or facing a graver charge in this country. Smart work that!"

Harmer made a savage retort, and left the room. Rose was still fretting from her recent interview with Reynolds, and was not in the mood to be nice to Brent.

"I'm not feeling my best this morning," she confessed. "Have you seen Harry of late?"

"Not for some days."

"And you have ceased to interest yourself in that girl?"

"Ann Blackham? Yes. We were wrong about her. She cannot help us to get the Reckoner. She knows nothing."

Rose laughed bitterly.

"I think there is very little she does not know. Of course, she deceives you men. It only needs a pair of soft eyes and an innocent expression to achieve that. She is nothing more than a vulgar little ta——"

"Rose!"

"Well, I've said it—and it's what I think. She's just planning to make Harry marry her, and he's nearly fool enough to do so."

"Would he be a fool? I'm not so sure, Rose. He might do a great deal worse."

She looked as if she could slay him on the spot, and he understood that expression of deepest resentment. With commendable boldness he faced the issue.

"You think a great deal of Harry?"

She started, and her cheeks coloured up guiltily.

"What a question! Haven't we always been close friends—you, I, and he?"

"I was not thinking of mere friendship. Why not be candid with me?"

"What do you mean to infer?"

"You—you love Harry Reynolds."

"Malcolm, how dare——!"

"Oh, it's plain enough. I have known it for a long time. It is also equally plain that Harry does not reciprocate in the same fashion. He can't help himself, Rose. You and he are not attuned to each other. You look at the world with practical eyes, and he—he is the born dreamer. If Harry could get

his way, he would build the whole world anew. But you—you and I are more or less satisfied with it as it is. And, that being so, why should we—you and I—not make the most of it ? ”

It was a plain proposal, and not the first. But somehow Rose felt it was the last. Brent looked uncommonly grim and serious. This had the ring of an ultimatum, and it gave her furiously to think. A mistake now, and the substance would follow the shadow.

“ May I tell you to-night, Malcolm ? ” she asked.

“ Yes. I am free after six o’clock. Let us take a meal somewhere, and then go to a show.”

She was quite agreeable, but proposed that he should dine with her and her father, as Harmer hated having his meal alone, and after dinner Swinton was calling to discuss a matter of business.

“ Father has an interest in soap,” she added. “ For some time past a new company has been a thorn in his side. Now he and Swinton have agreed to buy up the competitive company.”

“ For a song ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know. But trust father to make a good bargain.”

“ I do. Well—seven o’clock.”

. . . . .

Reynolds sat alone in his studio, gazing through the window at the starlit night. Ann had received

the letter from Paris that afternoon, and had come to him with it. It told her little more than he himself had told her. Blackham had received an offer from a distant relative—conditional upon his going to Canada at once. He would be in receipt of a small income, but in addition he swore he would try to obtain honest work. Would Ann come to him? If so, she must wire him at once, and then procure a passport. He would meet her at a certain address, and they would sail from Cherbourg without delay. He had much to tell her when they met.

“What—what am I to do?” she asked.

“Doesn’t Canada appeal to you, Ann?”

“Yes, but——”

“I think you should go.”

“You really think I could help him?”

“He loves you.”

“Yes, he loves me.”

It had only needed one little word from him to prevent her from taking that step, but he did not utter it. She asked him where she could procure a passport, and he gave her the required information.

“I shall see you again before—before I leave?” she asked.

“Of course. I will come and see you safely on the train.”

“No—no. I couldn’t bear that!”

In a hurry she had left him. Now the maggots were scampering in his brain. He was letting her go, giving her up, when his very soul craved for her.



Why not tell her the truth? Or, better still, tell her nothing? Why not cast to the flames those incriminating masks—destroy for ever all evidence of the Reckoner? Well, he could do the latter because they had served their purpose, but to lie to Ann, or to act a lie, was not in keeping with his ideas of decency. No, she must go, and he must try to forget!

He went to a bureau and unlocked it. From a drawer he extracted four delicately painted masks. All were slightly different, but one of them showed signs of being used on many occasions. He cast the newer ones into the fire, and watched them burn fiercely. The last one he fingered somewhat affectionately.

“My other self!” he mused. “Were you so bad? You gave me life, excitement, an object—but you locked out love, you scoundrel! At the last you have proved to be a robber. And there’s Harmer—with his bill still unpaid. I ought to have settled with him before I said good-bye to you. The oily old——.”

He had not heard the outer bell ring, and was startled when Tony suddenly entered and informed him that Brent had called. Quickly he thrust the mask into his pocket. Brent entered, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Ah, Harry! So you are up and about again?”

“Of course. There was nothing seriously wrong with me.”

"Hm! I just wondered whether you had heard all the latest developments in the Blackham business."

"I have. Ann told me."

"Blackham was acquitted. But I've another item of interest. The Lush murder is solved. We have the murderer when we want him."

"So you have landed the Reckoner? Good business!"

"Oh, no. The Reckoner was not the guilty person. A man named Anton Dubois planned it, and achieved it with the aid of a gunman—the man who came to give evidence in the Blackham trial. The Reckoner outshone himself. He cornered Jukes—the real assassin—and his old enemy at one stroke. Dubois shot himself before we could take him. But he cleared things up. Apparently the Reckoner knew that Dubois was negotiating with a certain person for the sale of the valuable document stolen from Lush. He got it before we got Dubois."

"So you are still without——?"

"No. He sent it to me by registered post."

"Is he mad?"

"A little, perhaps. Certainly a queer character. I suppose we shall get him in the long run, but he is giving us a devil of a chase for our money."

Reynolds nodded, and looked Brent up and down.

"Are you going to a dance?"

"No. I am taking Rose to a show. Any objections?"

"None."

"I thought not. As a matter of fact, I think that at last Rose and I understand each other. In a few hours I shall know for certain."

"Then it is too early for congratulations?"

"Slightly."

"Well, I wish you luck! How is Harmer keeping?"

"The same as ever—with his nose to the till. Planning with Swinton now to smash a soap company that has been queering his pitch for some time."

"The Rainbow Company?"

"I don't know the name of it. But presumably Harmer has hit it so hard in the market that they are willing to consider any offer for what remains of their business."

Reynolds's face grew grave.

"So that's how the wind blows! Does Harmer realise that every employee of the Rainbow is a crippled ex-Service man? They pooled their small war gratuities and started that company—worked like niggers to make it a success—and now Harmer, with all his millions, is going to reap the benefit. It is disgraceful!"

"I didn't know that," said Brent. "But, after all, it is business."

"Business! I call it foul robbery. While Harmer was making his millions those men were fighting for him—fighting in order to preserve his body and soul alive. Pouf!"

Brent shook his head sadly. He didn't want to argue the point.

"I'll have to go now," he said. "By the way, how is the great book progressing?"

"It doesn't progress. In two days I am losing my secretary."

"You mean—Ann?"

"Yes. Ann is going abroad."

"But—I thought ——"

"Ah! What did you think?"

"Oh, nothing. You are a bit of a puzzle, Harry."

"To you—perhaps. Give my kind regards to Rose. Good evening!"

Reynolds drew the mask from his pocket, and gazed at it with furrowed brows. He had resolved it should follow the others into the flames, but now came the desire to check this infamous move of Harmer's. Why not? Why should Harmer slip through the net so easily? A stroke of a pen and he might gain thirty, forty, fifty thousand pounds. A cheque for a hundred or two to some charity and Harmer's queer conscience would be salved.

"Oh, no," he muttered. "The Reckoner will pass at midnight—instead of seven p.m."

With that he stuffed the mask into his pocket, and went to take his bath.

ROSE and Brent had gone to the theatre, and Harmer and Swinton drank an extra coffee and liqueur before they attended to the business at hand. They were both in jubilant spirits, for the end of a long and bitter battle was at hand. The Rainbow Company, small as it was compared with the allied companies under Harmer's chairmanship, had put up a stubborn fight against unfair aggression, until their small funds gave out.

"Cheeky devils!" said Harmer. "They would have done better had they given way at first. Anyway, it's all over now."

"Have you got the contract?" enquired Swinton.

"In the safe. I'll get it."

Harmer went to the corner of the library and slid back a panel. He returned to his confrère with a typed document of some four pages. Swinton took it and read it.

"Seven thousand pounds! They agree to that?"

"They thundering well had to."

"And that includes premises and stock?"

"All in."

"By Jove, that's good business!"

"It merely needs signing."

"We can do that now—as two directors. But it needs to be witnessed."



"Fenning will do. I'll ring for him. Here's a pen."

Their two signatures were appended to the contract, and Fenning, the butler, affixed his signature as witness.

"Exit the Rainbow!" laughed Swinton.

"Thank goodness!"

"And the cheque?"

"I'll send that when I get their signed copy back. Seven thousand! It's worth a hundred—to us."

"Easily! Let's have another drink."

For an hour and more they sat and talked "shop," and then Swinton yawned and intimated that it was time he found his bed. Harmer sat on, awaiting the return of Rose, for he was observant enough to know that this was a critical night for his daughter. He sincerely hoped she would come to her senses and give up dreaming about a man of Reynolds's type, who never had done any good for himself, and never would.

Tired from talking too much, he dropped into a doze. A few minutes later there was a slight noise at the window. Harmer stirred, but did not awaken fully. Then a blast of cold air entered the room, and the dozing man opened his eyes wide. A gasp of horror left his lips as he saw a figure by the window—a form whose face looked unreal, unearthly.

"Who—who——?"

"Hist!"

A pistol was pointed at Harmer's head, and the

tall form advanced towards the door, which lay to Harmer's left. It was locked, and the key retained. The intruder then deposited himself in a chair exactly opposite the amazed man.

"Now, Mr. Harmer, we shall be free from interruptions."

"You—you are the—the Reckoner!"

"A good guess. Did you expect me?"

"Put—put that pistol away!"

"If it unnerves you—certainly. But first shift your chair slightly—farther away from that bell. Ah, that is better!"

While Harmer obeyed, still under the spell of that curious mask, the visitor put out his hand and seized the document which was lying under the inkstand. Harmer gulped.

"Leave that——!"

"S-sh! This discussion is strictly private. If you will persist in raising your voice, I shall have to——"

He produced the pistol again, and Harmer winced and bade him pocket it.

"What—what do you want with me?" he asked in lower tones.

"Merely a business transaction—in connection with this very document. Sit quite still, please, while I have a glance at the conditions. Have a cigarette. It will brace your nerves."

"Damn you! I'm not afraid!"

"Not you! You have so many victories to your

credit. Ah, here we are ! Seven thousand pounds ! Seven thous—— ! ”

The pallid face was projected across the table. Harmer saw two dark, burning eyes, full of contempt—and something else. The lips that protruded between the edges of the mask curled scornfully.

“ A pretty good haul, Mr. Harmer ! A credit to your business acumen. So you have even descended to robbing the men who protected you and yours—men who suffered mutilation, pain, disillusion, while you stayed at home in comfort, and bled their mothers, sisters, and children.”

“ Look here—— ! ”

“ Don’t shout, if you value your safety. I am here on a serious errand, and I mean to get what I came for.”

Harmer’s nervous eyes roved round the room. Had he been nearer the bell he might have found the courage to push it, but raise his voice he could not—dare not. That mask had a queer hypnotic effect upon him, as had also the crisp, penetrating voice of the man before him.

“ What—what do you want ? ” he stammered.

“ Justice.”

“ You talk of justice ! ”

“ I do not merely talk of it. You are going to give those men a square deal. It needs but the slightest alteration in the purchase price. I will make it myself.”

He took the pen and altered the number “ seven ”

to read "seventy," and then placed the document before Harmer.

"Initial that alteration ! "

"Seventy thousand pounds ! No, I will not do it. Nothing in the world will make me do it."

"There are several excellent ways of making you do it. But one will suffice. Here is a truthful account of the inner transactions of the People's Bank, vouched for by the man who went to jail—the cashier."

"It's a lie ! "

"How can you say that without reading it ? Just take a glance at it, will you ? "

Harmer focused his nervous eyes on the neat typewriting. From his expression it was clear that what he read was the truth, which he imagined was buried deep in the past.

"Quite an interesting story, eh ? Am I to leave it with you—or shall it go to a certain newspaper ? Make up your mind."

"Nobody would believe it."

"That remains to be seen. The public is blind enough, but not so blind it cannot see facts when they are writ clear."

Harmer was breathing heavily. He had not bargained on this.

"How am I to know that you have not another copy—or will not make another copy ? " he asked.

"You have no security but my word of honour."

"Your word ! The word of——"

“The word of the Reckoner, who has always had a weakness for keeping it. Hurry! I have no time to waste. Yes or no?”

“I couldn’t trust a man like you.”

“Then our business is terminated. To-morrow the world will know how the great John Harmer became rich. It will be an interesting experiment.”

He stood up and pocketed the document, leaving the altered transfer on the table. Harmer gulped, and then waved his hand.

“Wait! You swear that if I initial that alteration you will give me that paper, and keep your mouth closed?”

“To-night sees the end of the Reckoner. This is the last throw of the dice.”

“I’ll—I’ll do it—damn you!”

He took up the pen and initialled the alteration in both the transfer and the duplicate copy. The Reckoner took them, and nodded his head.

“You are satisfied?”

“Yes, provided payment is made. If that is not done——”

“The cheque shall be sent. Give me that paper.”

The Reckoner handed over the typewritten article, and thrust the other documents into his pocket. Harmer twisted the incriminating article in his hands, and went to place it in the dying fire. As he did so, his finger moved swiftly to the switch which controlled the electric bracket over the fireplace—the only light in use at the moment.



Instantly the room was plunged into darkness, and, under cover of this, Harmer made for the window which the intruder had forced. Swiftly he removed the key, locked it from the outside, and then ran round the front of the house, in the hope of bolting the library door before the Reckoner made his escape that way.

To his tremendous joy, he ran full into Brent and Rose, who had returned much earlier than he expected. He clung to Brent's arm, gasping for breath.

"Mr. Harmer, what——?"

"The Reckoner—in the library. I've locked the window—but he has the key of the door."

In a second Brent was as alert as a wolf. He took a whistle from his pocket and blew it hard, then went to the front door and rang. The butler appeared quickly.

"Bolt the library door on the outside—quick!"

The astonished butler ran to obey, and Brent slipped round the garden to the windows of the library.

"Go to your room, Rose," said Harmer. "Leave this to us. I believe—I believe we have that scoundrel at last."

"But——"

"Quick! I must help Brent until a constable arrives."

He entered the hall with her, and emerged with a pistol which he kept for emergencies. In a few seconds he was with Brent.

"You are sure he is there?" asked Brent.

"Absolutely! There wasn't time for him to get through the hall. He is armed."

"So I should imagine.—Is that a constable?"

"Yes—yes! Hey, officer!"

The approaching man was a sergeant, and it was due to Brent's forethought that he was quite close to the house, for the inspector had long expected a visit of this nature.

"Sergeant!"

"Sir!"

"Guard this window! Better take Mr. Harmer's pistol. If a man attempts to force it, use such measures as you think fit."

"Very good, sir."

"What are you going to do?" asked Harmer.

"Open the library door. You have a duplicate key?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let us go inside."

The butler and the chauffeur were pressed into service and armed with useful instruments, and Brent proceeded to open the door. He entered the room, ready for any trouble. It was ablaze with light—but empty.

"Gone!" gasped Harmer.

"Confound! But where could he go?"

"Goodness knows! He certainly never left by the front door."

"Nor through the servants' hall," put in the butler.

“ Help ! ”

Harmer's face blanched as he recognised Rose's voice from upstairs.

“ My daughter ! He must be in—— ! For God's sake, hurry ! ”

Brent flew up the stairs, followed by Harmer and the other men. On the landing they saw Rose, in a state of tremendous agitation. She pointed to a window on the half-landing above her. It was open.

“ He went—through there ! ” she gasped. “ I—I saw him. He pushed me aside.”

Brent ran to the window. Immediately below it was a short fir-tree, on to which an athletic man might have jumped with some hope of survival. As he looked he saw a form moving amid the branches.

“ There he goes ! ”

A whistle pealed again, and Brent took a big risk. Climbing on the sill, he jumped clean into the tree. Badly bruised, he made an extremely rapid descent, and came full upon his quarry.

“ Hands up ! ”

The response was a lightning movement. Brent found himself held in a pair of powerful arms and borne backwards. For ten seconds he resisted stoutly, and then succumbed to the stronger man. The sergeant, brought to the spot by the call of the whistle, saw the quarry running swiftly across the garden. The next moment both he and Brent were in full chase.

THE Reckoner was on the run for the first time in his adventurous career, and he bitterly reproached himself for trusting Harmer for one moment. To make matters worse, he had reopened his old wound in his jump from the window and the subsequent struggle with Brent. The blood was now welling from it—warm, clogging blood, the loss of which was a serious threat to his safety.

Two hundred yards from the house he found a roaming taxi. He hailed it and jumped inside, giving the driver the name of a street near his abode. Almost before he had finished he saw two forms running in his rear, but fortunately their shouts were smothered by the noisy engine. About two minutes later he was aware that a taxi was in hot pursuit.

“Faster!” he said to the driver. “I have a most urgent appointment.”

The streets were almost deserted, and the driver, scenting a tip, trod on the pedal hard. The Reckoner lay back, feeling faint and weak, and at intervals he looked out, to see the pursuing vehicle still hanging on.

“For God’s sake, hurry!” he urged.

“Gosh, I’m all out!”

They were nearing Chelsea, but the Reckoner was scarcely aware of it. A reddish mist floated before his eyes, and the world seemed far—far away.

"Here we are!" said the driver suddenly.  
"Wake up, sir!"

The passenger made a tremendous effort to recover his strength. He found a pound note, and gave it to the driver, and then stepped on to the pavement. Things seemed to revolve about him, but he struggled on down a side-street. He saw the name on the wall—Purvis Street, and it was strangely familiar, he knew not why. Staggering like a drunken man, he reached a point about half-way down, and then fell on a doorstep. The door was open, but he could see the number on the glass fanlight above it—33. Then he remembered—No. 33 Purvis Street was Ann's address. It was a house transformed into three self-contained flats, and Ann's was at the top. While he ruminated on this fact, the lights of a taxi were seen at the far end of the street. It stopped. Almost unconsciously he commenced to climb the stairs, and finally reached the top. There was a door on the left. He fell against it and knocked.

A brief pause, and then the door opened—very slowly. A familiar face came to view—Ann's. Her eyes opened wide with amazement, and she made to close the door again, but he blundered through it, and measured his length on the carpet inside. Instantly she realised his plight, and her ready sympathy overcame her terror.

"Ann!"

"You! Why—why——?"



“ Lock—lock the door ! ”

“ Why—— ? ”

“ The—police ! ”

She hesitated, wrestling with her conscience the while, and then obeyed.

“ Thanks ! ”

He made an attempt to stand, but lost his balance and fell with a crash. With a low cry she ran to him. He was unconscious, with his masked face half hidden from her. The hat had fallen off, and the mask had become partly detached. Nervously she touched it, withdrew her fingers swiftly, and then, gaining courage, removed it. She got a glimpse of a profile that was strangely familiar. With an effort she turned the body over. A startled cry left her lips. The fully exposed face was that of Reynolds !

“ Harry ! Harry ! ” she wailed. “ You ! ”

There was no time for thought. Someone was knocking on the door—repeatedly. Beyond the small sitting-room was her bedroom, which she had just left. Gripping him by the shoulders, she dragged him through the door. He opened his eyes as he was brought up against the bed, and seemed to smile wanly.

“ You must rest there,” she murmured. “ Please—please try ! ”

A great effort, which brought a wince of pain to his face, and he was on the bed. Her nimble fingers removed the collar and coat, and she laid bare a great crimson patch.

"Ann! I'm—I'm——"

"Don't—speak!" she said hoarsely. "Just—just sleep!"

She put the bedclothes over him, and saw him close his eyes. In the mirror she regarded her own image—a pale, anguish-ridden form in a pink kimono, eyes which held terror, suspense, amazement. Then again the knocking.

Uttering a half-sob, she left the bedroom and locked the door, retaining the key. Nervously she went to the outer door, and opened it. Outside was Brent—alone. He pushed straight past her.

"How—how dare you?" she ejaculated.

"Sorry, but it was necessary. Now listen! A certain man—an old acquaintance of yours—was seen coming in this direction. I have reason to believe he is in this house."

"Who?"

"The Reckoner."

"But why—why——?"

"I have my own reasons for acting in this way. We saw him at about this spot, and he suddenly disappeared. If you are hiding him, you had better own up."

"Why—why should I hide—a criminal?"

"Let us call him—an old friend."

"Oh, won't you please go?"

"Not until I satisfy myself that he is not here. What is that room?"

"The kitchen."

"I'll take a glance at it."

While she strove to cover her emotion, he examined the small kitchen and larder; then the bathroom. Coming back, he looked under the settee in the sitting-room, and behind the casement curtains.

"Where does that door lead?"

"My—my bedroom."

"You were in bed when I knocked?"

"Yes."

"That is the only other room?"

"Yes—yes. You have made a great mistake."

"I should like to look inside—that room."

"But I swear it is my bedroom."

"All the same——"

"You have no right. You need a search-warrant—I know that. I won't——"

"If you have nothing to hide, what is there to fear? Search-warrant or not, I intend to search that room."

He went to the door, turned the handle, and shook it.

"Hm! Locked! Perhaps you will produce the key?"

"You—you are exceeding your duty."

"That you can worry out afterwards. The key?"

"I—I will not give it you."

"Very well! Then I regret I must use force."

He stood away from the frail door, and raised his

leg to administer a violent kick. Ann saw that it was useless to attempt to divert him.

"Wait!" she sobbed. "Here is—the key. But—but it is not—what you think."

Brent took the key and opened the door. Above the eiderdown on the bed, he saw a face that caused his eyes to open wide.

"Harry—Reynolds! By Jove, then——?"

Ann grew red, hesitated, and then put aside all her repugnance. She recalled the many kindnesses, the unpaid debts, and something else of greater potency went to kindle the flame of her great resolution.

"We—we——" she stammered.

Brent turned on her with contemptuous eyes.

"You mean he is your—— He has been here all the evening?"

Ann nodded, and turned her head away. But the form on the bed stirred. The dark eyes opened and focused themselves on Brent.

"Brent, you are a damned fool!"

"What's that?"

"I entered this flat less than ten minutes ago."

"Harry!" cried Ann hysterically.

"Look under the bed there—near the leg!"

Brent followed the direction indicated by the trembling finger, and picked up the mask which Ann had dropped in her haste.

"You—you the Reckoner!"

"Yes."

Brent was tremendously shaken. Even now it seemed impossible. He looked at Ann, but Ann was just realising that certain needs were urgent.

"He—he is hurt," she said. "I—I must attend to him. Please—please go away—now. To-morrow——"

She ran from the room to procure bandages and warm water. Brent was still gazing at the mask.

"I still don't understand," he mused.

"No, you wouldn't," replied Reynolds weakly. "Be a good chap and defer your arrest until to-morrow. I assure you I am—incapable of getting away. See!"

He pushed down the bedclothes and displayed his blood-stained garments. Brent winced at the horrid sight, and came closer to the bed.

"I shall be bound to arrest you to-morrow, Harry."

"Of course."

"I'm sorry I made that blunder—about Ann."

Reynolds's eyes bade him refer to that no more, and Brent made his way out. Reynolds was silent while Ann bathed his wound and bandaged it neatly, but all the time he was looking into the face which she tried to avert.

"Ann!"

"Y-yes."

"Why did—why did you say that?"

"What?"

"You know."



“ Because—I thought he would believe me. Why did you not let him believe me ? ”

He shook his head and smiled.

“ Rather the gallows than that, Ann.”

“ The—the gallows ! ”

He caught her hand weakly.

“ A figure of speech. There is nothing I have done that merits that punishment. Would you believe me, Ann, if I tell you that in my heart I am glad to have been the Reckoner ? I broke the law—but I broke it with a definite object, and a few years in jail will be well worth serving, knowing, as I do, a most marvellous truth.”

“ What—truth ? ”

“ That you love me—not the Reckoner, but Harry Reynolds. In any case, I had sworn to kill and bury that masquerading scoundrel to-night. What you were prepared to do for me has given me even more joy than the putting right of a few injustices. Ann, look at me ! ”

She turned her head to him, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“ I love you—Ann.”

She could make no response. Something seemed to choke her—hurt and torture her—until the flood-gates of her emotion were suddenly opened. Sinking to her knees, she cradled her head in the crook of his arm, and wept, and wept. . . .

Later he slept, and all night Ann, borne to dizzy heights by her first realisation of reciprocated love,

watched beside him. Nothing mattered now. Nothing in the world could rob her of the priceless thing she had found.

## THE SPLENDID CRIME

## XXXVI

A LITTLE less than a year later a man stepped through the wrought iron gates of one of His Majesty's prisons. But he had not the appearance of the habitual jail-bird. On the contrary, his eyes were bright, and his step light and agile. He gave a sniff at the free, fresh air, and then halted and took off his hat as a girl stepped from a taxi that was waiting at the corner of the road.

"Ann!"

"Harry! At last!"

"Let me look at you."

"In—in the taxi."

"So I will. Tell that fellow to drive all round London—Regent's Park, Hampstead. Oh, Ann, what a day!"

Removed from the public gaze, he took her in his arms, kissed her, and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"So you waited, Ann?"

"I would have waited ten years—twenty."

"Well, it wasn't quite so bad as that."

"You needn't have gone at all. Brent told me that if you had pleaded 'Not guilty' it would have been difficult to convict you. But you—you practically asked them to put you away."

"Well, yes."

"Wasn't that a little cruel?"

"I didn't mean to be cruel, Ann. But I felt—I felt that something should be paid for all the fun I had—for all the happiness that was coming to me. Now—it's just like a nasty debt that has been liquidated."

"But there was no debt!"

"I'm not so sure. We make our own laws, and if we leave great loopholes the fault is ours. I saw a few loopholes, and tried to stop some of them. But isn't it better to talk about the future?"

"The future?"

"Our future."

"Where does that lie?"

"Here—anywhere. The world is large, and we are free to wander for a while. The first thing to do is to get married. Does that prospect frighten you?"

"Do I look afraid?"

She was smiling into his eyes, caressing the hand that was about her neck.

"You never were afraid, Ann."

"I was—of the Reckoner."

"How strange you never guessed! You were my one fear—for you saw me in both rôles."

"But you were so different—your voice, your actions, your appearance; and then, when I might have suspected, the Reckoner vanished."

"He had to. No more, Ann. He is dead and

buried for ever. Here is the park. Let us leave this frowsy contraption and walk for a bit. It's a little too much like the place I have just left."

They paid off the driver and walked under the bare trees. It was winter, and the park was invaded by a bitter wind, but in their hearts it was mid-June. They walked on and on, forgetful of everything but this wonderful reunion.

THE END





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# THE splendid crime



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